



ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 2 **Apprentice Shrine
Maiden Vol. 2**

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**



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Myne's Family

Myne

The protagonist, a daughter of a soldier who often collapses from fevers. She learned that her Devouring heart is mana and became an apprentice blue shrine maiden, a position normally restricted to nobles. She will do anything to read books.



Gunther

Myne's father, a captain at the south gate. He loves his family so much it makes everyone exasperated.

Effa

Myne's mother who works at a dye workshop. Always struggling to keep her loose-cannon husband and daughters under control.



Tuuli

Myne's older sister, an apprentice seamstress who is kind and takes care of others. According to Myne, she is "totally an angel."



Cast of Characters

Summary of Part One:

A girl who adores books named Urano was reincarnated as Myne, a poor and sickly child. The world has a low literacy rate and paper is too expensive to buy, so she set out on a quest to make her own books, and eventually made her own plant paper. Upon coming of age, she discovered a room of books in the local temple. She immediately decided to become an apprentice shrine maiden, both to get her hands on the books and to use the magic tools there to survive her mysterious illness known as the Devouring.

Gilberta Company



Lutz

An apprentice at the store. Myne's friend, partner in crime, and her reliable health manager.



Benno

The chief of the Gilberta Company and Myne's business mentor and guardian.



Corinna

Benno's younger sister and the heir to the store. She's a talented seamstress with her own workshop.

Mark

A lehrer (employee) at the store. Benno's skilled right-hand man.

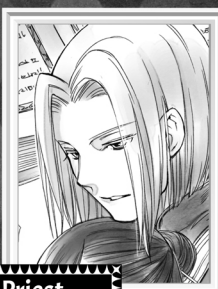
High Bishop

The highest authority in the temple. He hates the commoner Myne because she crushed him with her mana.



High Priest

Myne's guardian in the temple. He values her talent in math and large amount of mana.



The Temple

Fran

Myne's skilled head attendant. Used to serve the High Priest.

Gil

Used to be a problem child, but is now working hard running the Myne Workshop.

Delia

A spy sent by the High Bishop. Says "Geez!" a lot.

Wilma

A gray shrine maiden with a talent for art.

Rosina

A gray shrine maiden with a talent for music.

Karstedt...Captain of Ehrenfest's Knight's Order. Hugo...A chef hired by Benno.

Damuel...A kind knight serving the Order.

Ella...An apprentice chef hired by Benno.

Shikza...A less kind knight serving the Order.

Johann...A skilled apprentice at the smithy.

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Prologue

Effa listened to Karla the entire time she was washing dishes. From both her chattiness and her returning plumpness, she could tell that Karla was relieved at Lutz finally coming back home. She had fallen disconcertingly quiet while Lutz had been gone.

“Not to mention, I’ve never seen my husband talk that much before. It’s still hard for me to believe!”

Karla, while hiding that they had been summoned to the temple, talked at length about how much her normally quiet husband Deid cared about their son. It seemed they finally understood all too well how hard Lutz was working after they went to the Merchant’s Guild and saw him do his job.

“Sure, he said he was learning his letters with Myne, but I never thought he’d know how to read paperwork that confusing and wordy.” Karla gave an exaggerated laugh, but it was clear that she was happy to see her child’s growth. She had basically started to brag non-stop.

Effa had paled with terror when Myne told her that the Lutz family had been summoned by the High Priest for a discussion, remembering her own experience at the temple, but it seemed everything had gone perfectly well for them. That was a relief.

“By the way, how’re you doing, Effa? You seem kinda sick a lotta the time, but I’m guessing it’s calming down by now?”

“I think it’s about time to tell the kids about it,” said Effa with a smile as she rubbed her stomach. Her once-awful morning sickness had begun to calm down, which meant she had most likely survived the most dangerous time for miscarriages. Effa began tidying up the cleaned dishes, feeling happy.

“Right, Effa. Myne was a big help to us this time. Tell her thanks for me, would you?”

Effa nodded to Karla and went back home. Myne was waiting right at the door, having probably heard her footsteps. She said she would help put away the dishes, then stood on a chair in order to reach the shelves and lined up the cleaned dishes, one by one. Myne couldn’t draw water from the well, nor could she wash dishes. Effa knew that she was just trying to help where she could, but when Myne tried too hard, she ended up collapsing. Being a bit more restrained would be ideal.

“Mom, are you feeling better yet? Are you sure you’re okay?”

asked Myne after putting away all the dishes.

“Myne. You see, I have a baby in my belly. You’re going to be a big sister.”

“Bwuh?! Bwuuh?!” Myne got so surprised she nearly fell off the chair. Effa smiled as she held her steady. Waiting until she finished with the dishes had been the right call.

Myne climbed off the chair and looked at Effa’s belly curiously. It wasn’t large enough to be visible yet. For a second she thought that Myne didn’t believe her, but then she grabbed her head and started saying unfathomable things again.

“NOOOOOO! I barely remember anything from the pregnancy books I read since I didn’t think any of it would matter to meeeee! Gaaah! Um, what was that breathing technique again?! I guess we should be quiet when the (morning sickness) hits, make sure you get enough to eat, and encourage consistent exercise?! I think?!”

...*What has gotten into her?* Myne was cradling her head as if she was extremely anxious about it. Maybe she was nervous about having a new sibling. Effa began to wonder if she should console Myne, when Tuuli (who had been preparing for work) came rushing into the kitchen with an excited cry.

“Really?! Woow! I’ll sew some clothes and diapers for the baby!”

Effa smiled at Tuuli, who immediately thought of things she could do to help the baby. Myne began almost competitively murmuring about what she could do for the baby too. Effa didn’t expect Myne to be able to do anything, so just celebrating the baby would be enough for her. But that wouldn’t be enough for Myne, so after some thought, her head shot up with a beaming smile.

“I’ll make a (picture book) for the baby!”

“...A what? I’m not sure what that is.” Effa and Tuuli looked at each other, heads tilted in confusion.

“It’s a book with pictures! I’ll make a book to help kids read!”

“Ahahaha, that’s just like you, Myne.” Tuuli’s eyes widened at Myne’s explanation, then she burst into laughter. Myne always did think about books, but in the end Effa was just glad she wasn’t opposed to getting a new sibling.

“Working hard for the baby means you’ll be a good elder sister too, Myne.”

“I’m gonna shower that baby with tons of love. Tuuli’s going to use her sewing skills to make clothes and stuff, so I’m gonna put everything I have into making educational toys. I’ll work hard for the baby. I’m definitely, definitely gonna be a good older sister!”

...*Oh no. She’s getting too excited.* In no time at all, Myne’s excitement turned from cute to terrifying. This was no doubt the start of an unfathomable rampage. Effa knew this deep inside from all her

past experience with Myne's frenzies. Tuuli probably felt the same.

"You'll get a fever with all that excitement, Myne. Try to calm down a little."

"Uh huh. It's going to be real hard for Mom, Myne, so you need to take better care of yourself."

"I know that. I will." So Myne said, but her expression made it clear that she wouldn't. Her head was no doubt already filled with those (picture books).

One Wilma, Please

“Eheheh, heheheheeeh. Good morning, Lutz. Let’s stop by the store before the temple today!”

When Lutz came to get me, I greeted him while humming. Lutz took a quick step back as if he had seen something horrifying, then looked at Mom for an explanation.

“Myne, I’ll explain to Lutz. Hurry and get your stuff ready,” said Mom while rubbing her temples, so I went to the bedroom.

What were some good books for babies? Thinking back to best-sellers, I was pretty sure there was one where it was just a series of pages alternating between someone hiding their face and showing their face. A game of “peekaboo,” but in picture book form.

...But I didn’t know what the equivalent of peekaboo was in this world. I could guess that the process of hiding one’s face then showing it was universal, but I didn’t know what they said to the baby. Maybe I could ask someone and they would know what I meant. *Eh... I think it’ll be best to just turn one of Mom’s stories into a picture book. That seems like it’ll be for the best.*

“I’m sorry, Lutz. She got a little too excited over becoming a big sister, so maybe she shouldn’t go outside today...”

“Nah, she’s gonna end up like this when the baby’s born anyway. She takes after your husband.”

“You’re right. Gunther got just as excited.” Mom shook her head with exasperation, but her smile was still a happy one.

“Okay, I’m ready. Bye, Mom. I’ll be back. Don’t push yourself when you’re feeling bad. I’ll work hard and make lots of money so you can take it easy.”

“Myne, your father said the exact same thing this morning.”

I left home while Mom giggled at me. First, we were going to the Gilberta Company. I needed to report that I was becoming a big sister and along the way order karuta for the orphanage. I talked to Lutz at length about picture books as we walked.

“Tuuli’s going to make clothes and diapers for the baby, so I’m going to make (picture books).”

“What’re those?”

“Books with pictures that are easy for kids to read,” I explained while puffing my chest out with pride, which led to Lutz sighing and

shaking his head.

“...C’mon, a kid that’s just been born won’t know how to read.”

“Reading aloud to kids is important! I’ll read lots and lots of books to him. We’ll probably need to make thick paper first. But since babies like to put all sorts of things into their mouths, I think maybe thin boards will be better than paper. Or maybe we could make a book out of cloth? Oh, but I’ve never seen (felt) here before. And I won’t be able to help at all with cloth books. Lutz, what should I do?” I looked up at Lutz, but he was avoiding eye contact, his gaze wavering.

“I mean, uuh...”

“I’ll be sad if I don’t get to help make a picture book. But paper picture books will tear easily or maybe even get chewed up, and just thinking about ink in a baby’s mouth is... aaah! It’s too dangerous!” I cradled my head, imagining a baby with ink in its mouth and chewed-up paper everywhere.

Lutz sighed with exasperation and slapped a hand on my shoulder. “Calm down, Myne. It’ll be next spring before he’s born, right? It’s not happening tomorrow.”

“But I want to make lots of prototypes and improve, improve, improve until I have something perfect!”

“You going crazy never ends well. You’re just gonna end up on the floor. Calm down and listen to what people tell you.”

We arrived at the Gilberta Company as Lutz admonished me. Mark was inside the store as always, working briskly.

“Mark, is Benno here? I want to go to Sieg’s carpentry workshop again to order more wood boards for karuta sets.”

“I’ll handle it. You certainly seem pleased today, Myne.” The moment Mark said that while getting out supply order boards, my hype shot up so high I could feel it.

“Eheheh. Guess what, Mark? I’m going to be a big sister! I’ll be really busy making books, karuta, building blocks, and all sorts of things in preparation.”

“Oh, a book for a baby, hm? While you’re here, you may want to inform the master of this.” Mark took us to the office with a smile and I immediately ran up to Benno.

“Good morning, Benno. I’m going to be a big sister when spring comes. So, I’m going to make a (picture book) for the baby!”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“A book for kids!”

“A book for kids, huh? But kids can’t read.” Benno said the same thing Lutz did. Picture books were perfect for building bonds between parents and children; just looking at the pictures was fun on its own, and they helped kids get used to letters from a young age. Why did nobody appreciate their glory?

“Reading aloud to kids is important. It’ll help them learn letters from a young age.”

“Hmm. One of those might be a good gift for Corinna. But who’s gonna be drawing the art?”

“Me, of course! Filled with love!” It was going to be a gift for my little brother or sister. Of course I would make it myself.

“No. Use the artist you got last time. Otherwise you’ll mess with the kid’s taste in art. They might never recover.”

“So mean!”

“The truth hurts. You should thank me for warning you.”

Benno forced me to promise to use the same artist as last time, Wilma. I headed for the temple feeling pouty, as if my love as an older sister had been rejected.

“Hey, Myne. If you’re gonna be making lots of picture books from now on, maybe you should hire that artist full-time or something? I’m guessing one picture book won’t be enough for you.”

“It definitely won’t.” If I was going to end up getting Wilma’s help for a countless number of picture books, it would be wise to make her my attendant.

“Morning, Fran. Guess what? I’m gonna be a bi—”

“Watch your language, Myne. And that can wait. My report comes first.” Lutz interrupted me, pointing out that I was talking too casually, then explained to Fran why I was excited and warned him that I might collapse at any time. “I’m guessing she won’t calm down until she gets a fever at least once. You can just let her be and wait for that to happen.”

“...Understood. I will guard her with caution. However, Sister Myne, please take care not to inform Delia about the baby. The High Bishop has not made any moves as of yet, but he is certainly continuing to gather information on you. Judging by your excitement, I believe the pregnancy and baby will become significant weak points for him to exploit.”

Fran’s warning made the blood drain from my face. If something happened to Mom or her baby now, I had no confidence that I could hold my mana back.

“There should be no issue with discussing your new products or the Myne Workshop, but your little sibling should go unmentioned. In the temple, the birth of newborns is not a joyous occasion.”

I felt my excited mood plummet as I thought back to what happened to the flower-offering gray shrine maidens who ended up pregnant. Fran, trying to cheer me up a bit, changed the subject. “You are planning to make many books, surely. Perhaps now is the time to ask for Wilma?”

“You’re right. I would like to make Wilma my attendant if possible, but I’m not sure how to go about it.”

Fran fell into thought, then suggested we seek the High Priest’s permission first. I wrote a letter stating that I had a request, then asked Fran to deliver it to him and get a date for a meeting. At fourth bell, after work was done, the High Priest skimmed the letter then looked at me.

“Myne, what is your request? I have the time to answer if it is a minor issue.”

“High Priest, please give me Wilma!” I made the request as short as I could, which for some reason made the High Priest rub his temples.

“I do not understand what you’re saying. Be more clear.”

“Please give me Wilma, the girl with the smile of a saint, a talent for art, and a deep compassion for others.”

I tried explaining who Wilma was to the best of my ability, but the High Priest just looked at Fran with utter bafflement. Fran seemed to understand what he wanted just from a glance, and began his explanation immediately.

“She would like permission to make Wilma her attendant. Wilma is a gray shrine maiden specializing in art who once served as Christine’s attendant.”

“Ah, she served that art-loving shrine maiden... I believe an expert of music will be more fruitful to Myne’s education than an artist. There was a gray shrine maiden talented in music, was there not? Select her instead.”

“Rosina is the musician, I believe.”

Before I knew it, the conversation had shifted from Wilma becoming my attendant to Rosina. I hurriedly interjected before it was too late. “High Priest, I need Wilma’s help, not Rosina’s. How could I make (picture books) with music?”

“What are those?”

How many times had I been asked that question in one day? I would have thought that picture books for kids would at least exist in a place with book-owning nobles, but the High Priest was furrowing his brow hard enough to engrave wrinkles into it.

“They’re books for kids with pictures in them. Surely nobles have books like that.”

“With books as expensive as they are, it would make no sense to make any for kids that might treat them poorly. Books are for learning, and they need only present their information clearly and concisely.”

It seemed that books aimed at children simply didn’t exist at all. Since paper was expensive and each book had to be hand-written from

the ground up, each page was packed to the brim with letters. Putting aside the charts and maps necessary for teaching, no books were built around pictures.

I nodded, now understanding why picture books didn't exist here, and for some reason the High Priest also nodded in understanding.

"I understand that you desire an artist to craft books with pictures. But what you need is education and enrichment. Make both Rosina and Wilma your attendants, not just one."

"Bwuh? I couldn't take on two new attendants at once, that'd be so wasteful. Not to mention that I don't even have an instrument, much less the opportunity to play one. I don't have the funds to buy an expensive instrument and I don't feel the need for music to be involved in my religious education."

"I see. You certainly cannot practice music without an instrument."

I went ahead and nodded with the High Priest, but I didn't have much interest in music either way. I liked listening to it, but I had never wanted to play any myself—even if it would be a lovely skill to have, I would rather spend my time reading than practicing to learn an instrument.

I expressed my need for an artist and got approval to make Wilma my attendant, so that was that. I started to leave the High Priest's room with satisfaction.

"Now, Fran. Let us go to the orphanage this afternoon to see what Wilma thinks of all this."

"What Wilma thinks? Are you not making her your attendant?" Fran blinked in confusion at my statement.

"...She might not want to serve me because I'm a commoner." My attendants had all been ordered to serve me and not a single one of them had wanted to. Not Fran, not Gil, not Delia. It wasn't too long ago that Gil was telling me to my face that he didn't want to serve a commoner.

Things were going so well now that I didn't want to ruin everyone's mood by taking in someone who would be unhappy about serving me all the time. Wilma could keep doing the art for me even if she didn't want to be my attendant, though I'd end up constantly nervous about someone stealing her away.

"Sister Myne, you wished to talk to me?" Wilma, who normally discussed how the orphans were doing and what the orphanage needed with a calm smile on her face, looked at Fran and me anxiously.

"Wilma, would you consider being my attendant? This isn't an order, but a question. You can say no if you like."

Wilma's eyes wavered nervously, then she sighed and lowered her eyes. "...I truly appreciate the offer, but it would be wise to ask Rosina instead."

Wilma glanced at Fran, then looked away with a troubled expression. She furrowed her brow a bit, then slowly opened her mouth, as if she really didn't want to say what she was about to say.

"In the past, I was... I was once fooled by a blue priest and taken to a flower offering. My mistress Christine noticed my absence and arrived in time to rescue me, but ever since then I have been uneasy around men. I will obey if you order me to be your attendant, but if you do value my desires, I would like to stay in the girls' building of the orphanage. There are only children and girls here."

In the Noble's Quarter, the rooms of attendants were separated by gender and located completely separately from their master's room. But in the orphanage director chambers, they were separated only by floor and the girls upstairs had to pass through the first floor to leave. Visitors like Lutz and Benno often came to the second floor, not to mention Fran and other gray priests. It was far from an environment with no men. I understood Wilma's position, but there was something I didn't get.

"Isn't there a chance you'll be selected to offer flowers if you stay in the orphanage?"

"There is not a blue priest whose eyes would fall on a girl as plain as myself." Although Wilma probably kept her hair bundled tightly to stop it from standing out, her hair was an orange color that was noticeable no matter what she did, and anything that might be considered plain about her just served to make her seem more chaste. There would definitely be at least a few blue priests whose eyes fell on her.

"In that case, Wilma, I will ask the High Priest to allow you to serve me as an attendant in name only, allowing you to stay at the orphanage. I intend to make many books for children containing art, so I will need your assistance no matter what."

"I believe it would be simpler just to give me an order..."

"I don't want to force you to do work in an environment that will make you unhappy." I personally didn't like people ordering me around, and since attendants moved into their master's chambers, their entire lives became their work. She would become consumed with anxiety if she felt awful every hour of every day while working.

"If I do not need to leave the orphanage, then I would love to be of assistance to you, Sister Myne." Wilma spoke with a bashful smile.

I pumped myself up, preparing to convince the High Priest at any cost so I could protect Wilma's smile, but Fran spoke out before it ever came to that.

“Sister Myne, attendants always move to their master’s chambers. She cannot stay in the orphanage. How do you intend to convince the High Priest?”

I looked between Wilma and some nervous children watching from some distance away. “There are not many gray shrine maidens to look after the young children right now. It is not uncommon for the children to catch sudden fevers in the night, and as the orphanage director, I would like my attendant to keep an eye on them. How is that?”

“...I see you didn’t come here without thinking things through first. I find that somewhat relieving.”

That was pretty rude of him to say, but at the very least Fran wasn’t just being stubborn. The High Priest would understand if I had reasoning to back me up.

“Do you think he would allow me to leave Wilma in the orphanage as my attendant?”

“Doing so would be unprecedented, but given the current state of the orphanage and Wilma’s situation, I believe that the High Priest might possibly allow it if told all the details.”

With Fran’s approval, I wrote a letter requesting a meeting with the High Priest. He sent back a reply saying we would discuss things in my room, since he wanted to hear Fran’s thoughts as well.

Over the five days leading up to the meeting, I worked with all the vigor I had. I was having Gil make the thick paper that would be necessary for picture books in the Myne Workshop, with the promise that I would buy them through Lutz once it was ready. At the same time, I was telling Mom’s stories in the orphanage so that I could see which were well-received by the kids and which would make for good picture books.

But the kids ended up asking what words meant so frequently that they never got to enjoy the story, and Wilma told me she wouldn’t be able to draw art for them since she didn’t know what life in the city was like. There was a bigger gap in cultural understanding between those in the temple and commoners than I had expected.

On top of that, those in the temple had no innate understanding of anthropomorphism—animals acting and talking like people—so not even stories like *The Three Little Pigs* or *Momotaro* went over well with them. They just kept asking how animals could talk. It seemed that not even my own Japanese children’s stories would go over well as picture books. Despite everything Benno said, I still thought it would be best if I drew the first picture book for my little sibling myself.

In other news, Hugo and Ella learned almost all of the recipes for the Italian restaurant, so we brought in a new chef. A man about the

same age as Hugo was getting pumped about the food while shouting shocked exclamations just as his predecessor had. Ella, who was helping him, told him not to worry and that he'd get used to it soon, her expression making it clear that she was reminiscing over how far she had come.

Finally, the day of the meeting arrived. The meeting was at fifth bell in the afternoon, so I didn't get to go to the book room like normal. I stayed in my chambers while learning how to welcome the High Priest into my room and what his preferred kind of tea was. Eventually, a significant amount of time before the meeting, a bell signifying a visitor rang outside the door.

"That would be one of the High Priest's attendants," said Fran while standing up and heading to the first floor. I couldn't tell the difference myself, but apparently different sounds and ways of ringing the bell signified different things. Maybe the High Priest was so busy he had to change the time of the meeting.

"I have brought a gift from the High Priest. Where shall I take it?" said the servant, who sounded like Arno.

"To the second floor," replied Delia. "Our mistress will receive it right away."

Hearing their conversation, I hurriedly plastered the dignified smile of a noble on my face.

"Please excuse me, Sister Myne." With Arno at the lead, a group of gray priests brought in large boxes at Delia and Fran's instructions. Arno wrinkled his eyes nostalgically and looked around my room. "...I see you have left the room unchanged, Sister Myne."

"Wha?"

"Oh, pay me no mind. Three large boxes, two small boxes. That is everything."

"Please tell the High Priest that I thank him ever so much." I spoke to Arno with a smile and a nod. The gray priests lined up and left the room, once again at Arno's lead. Fran watched them go, shut the front door behind them, then hurriedly climbed back to the second floor.

"Let us open them immediately. The High Priest will be here before long. Delia, go to the workshop and summon Gil."

"Understood. Geez! Why did he have to deliver the gifts so soon before the meeting?!" Delia ran off and Fran began to hurriedly open the boxes. Delia quickly returned with Gil and started helping Fran. Inside one big box was a bedding set. The other two boxes each contained an instrument, one adult-size and one child-size. The smaller boxes had various tools for maintaining the instruments. It seemed that the High Priest intended to educate me no matter the

cost.

Woooow. I turned him down because I don't have an instrument, so he gave me two instruments. What a sight to behold.

"So, Fran. Did you hear anything from the High Priest about all these gifts?" The sheer quantity of the gifts made me feel more conflicted than pleased. Especially the bedding set. Nobody had ever given me one as a gift before and it kind of felt like a bit much.

Fran also looked conflicted. "He became furious when you collapsed in the repentance chamber, questioning why you had no bed prepared despite your tendency to collapse from weakness, but I still did not expect him to send bedding in its entirety..."

I had also thought that I would need at least a mattress in the temple since I collapsed so often, but I hadn't expected the High Priest to gift me one. I walked up the bed which Gil and Delia had prepared, pressing down on the mattress to see how it felt. The bedding the High Priest had prepared wasn't a straw-packed mattress like I was used to, but a high-quality mattress like the one I had used at Freida's house. The silky smooth sheets felt nice to the touch and were covered with fancy embroidery. The cloth and embroidery alone would run an enormous cost. I got dizzy just thinking about how expensive it must have been.

"Fran, is it commonplace for nobles to send this manner of gifts to each other? Or do I now owe a debt to him which I will need to pay later? What if he asks for the payment and I cannot afford it...?"

"I believe that this is his apology for sending you to the repentance chamber and leading you to collapse in ill health. You should be fine simply expressing your gratitude."

"My gratitude... How should I thank the gods this time?" If I had to learn yet another new god's name just to express my thanks, I would lose my mind. Fran stifled a laugh with a hand over his mouth.

"This time, please thank the High Priest, not the gods."

After finding a place to put the tools and instruments, I offered the wooden boxes and cloth within them to my attendants, as was customary. Fifth bell rang not long afterwards, and the High Priest came immediately with Arno. I welcomed and greeted him just as Fran had taught me.

"You faltered as you spoke, but at least you've learned what to say," commented the High Priest. The lack of any harsh rebuke meant that maybe I did sound more like a noble girl now.

"High Priest, I thank you ever so much for the comfortable bedding you have gifted me." I thanked him after we reached the second floor, and for some reason he cradled his head. "Um, did I do something wrong? I just thanked you, didn't I?"

"Indeed, but there was no need for you to state the contents of the

gift. In the future, be vague when giving your thanks. 'I appreciate the wonderful gift, you have granted my wish,' and so on."

Okay. Don't say the contents of the gifts, I repeated on the inside, at which point the High Priest grimaced and lowered his voice. "Furthermore, tell no one that I gifted you bedding. Under normal circumstances, a man will only gift bedding to their family, their fiancée, or... their mistress. Stating it in public will invite unthinkable misunderstandings."

"Bwuh?! Wh-Why would you do something so easily misinterpreted?!" The High Priest didn't seem like the kind of person to do something so thoughtless. He wasn't me, after all. I didn't understand why he would run the risk of doing something that could be misunderstood like that.

"You are at fault here. Despite having collapsed in the temple several times before due to your poor health, you have refused to prepare bedding for yourself. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw Fran rest your unconscious body upon the boards of the empty bed. If I had done nothing, I imagine you never would have prepared your own bedding," he said with a glare.

I avoided eye contact, since I only ever thought about getting bedding at the exact moment I needed it, and then immediately forgot afterwards. "...Aww. I'm sorry."

The High Priest gave a fake cough and glanced at the table. I remembered that I hadn't offered a seat to him and thus did so at once. As our visitor this time was the High Priest, Fran prepared the tea instead of Delia. Despite using the same water and same tea, the tea Fran made always seemed to taste so different. Delia watched Fran carefully so that she could learn from his fluid, almost beautiful movements.

"Aah, it's been so long since I've had your tea, Fran. It smells as splendid as ever." The High Priest's expression softened as he enjoyed his tea, which made Fran smile a little. Gil brought in a tray which Delia took and set onto the table.

"High Priest, would you like cookies with your tea? They are less sweet than normal, to suit the palate of a man."

After eating a cookie, the High Priest's eyes widened. The fact that he immediately went to take another one meant he probably liked them.

"...Myne, where did you get these?"

"At the moment, they are being made exclusively in my kitchen. I intend to serve these cookies in my Italian restaurant with tea, with the option to buy individual ones to take home."

The moment I said that, the High Priest began rubbing his temple as if trying to understand the implications of what I had just said.

“You have your hands in not just paper and rinsham, but in cooking as well?”

“Yes. There are plans to hold a taste-testing session before the restaurant opens in full. Please come if you have the time. It will be a restaurant that offers food fit for the nobility. Fran has already assured us of the quality, but I would like to eat the food of a true noble at least once.”

I practically yelled *Please invite me to a meal!* in the roundabout style of a noble, and the High Priest was experienced enough in reading between the lines that he picked up on my intentions. He lowered his eyes in defeat and promised to invite me to lunch sometime in the near future. I pumped my fist below the table. That was one entry on Benno’s list of problems settled. While at lunch with the High Priest I would thoroughly check the contents of the meal, how it tasted, and what the service was like.

The High Priest jumped straight to the point of the meeting after he had tried the tea and cookies. “So, you wish to discuss Wilma?”

“Would you permit Wilma to stay in the orphanage even after becoming my attendant?”

The High Priest frowned in confusion. Attendants, as their name implied, were expected to attend to their master. Those in the orphanage all wished to leave, and it was unheard of for an orphan to wish to stay there if given the opportunity to escape.

“There isn’t anyone there to look after the pre-baptism children, so I would like to use my authority as orphanage director to leave Wilma there so that she might take care of them. Wilma herself wishes for this as well.”

“High Priest,” added Fran, “I support her request. The children are in poor health and frequently have fits in the middle of the night. Wilma and Sister Myne are both very worried about them.” Fran’s follow-up made the High Priest stroke his chin in thought.

“...Wilma staying at the orphanage will be all the more reason to make Rosina your attendant as well. I have prepared the instruments already. That should settle your complaints.” He glared at me, but I still just didn’t agree.

“Why is it so important for me to learn to play an instrument? Will I need to play music in religious ceremonies?”

“It will not be important whatsoever in the temple. There are many blue priests with no appreciation for the arts,” said the High Priest while taking out a small magic tool and placing it on the table. It was the anti-eavesdropping magic tool. I reached out and clenched it in my hand as the High Priest did the same with the other half.

“Your future will inevitably be one intertwined with that of the nobility. It is best you prepare to enter noble society now.”

“...But I have no intention of leaving my family.” Hence only commuting to the temple rather than moving here completely. However, despite knowing that I had let my mana go on a rampage to protect my family, the High Priest was confident enough to say that I would *inevitably* enter noble society.

“You may not know this, but only couples with similar quantities of mana can have children. You have enough mana to comfortably offer ten small magic stones during an offering, and you can enter my hidden room. In other words, you will only be able to have children with a noble. It would be extremely difficult for you to marry in the lower city.”

Speaking of which, Delia had mentioned something about equivalent amounts of mana being needed for a couple in the past. I hadn’t really thought about it since I was so mad at the cruelty of the blue priests, but the same rule applied to me. Regardless, I found it hard to care.

“I’ve never had any hope of getting married, so I don’t think that’s a significant problem.”

“Wait. Why do you say that?”

“As you know, High Priest, I am very weak. No man would want to marry a girl who can barely move and catches fevers all the time. I would just be dead weight to them.”

The first requirement for being a good wife in our poverty-stricken part of the city was being healthy. A pleasant personality and a working spirit came afterwards. One’s beauty depended on their sewing ability and such, but I was out of the question before it came to that. Not that it mattered to me; after all, love and romance had hardly been a part of my life even in my Urano days. I would be fine with a life of just making and reading books here.

“Commoners and nobles are fundamentally different. The mana of a child is largely influenced by their mother. You have so much mana it is hard to believe that you are a Devouring child born by chance. Due to the diminished quantity of nobles, when you come of age, nobles with similarly significant mana will flock around you. You have only been ignored up until now because you are so weak you might die at any moment, which would be a waste of all the money spent on raising you. You will not be able to escape from the families of every blue priest here.”

I hadn’t thought that I was being seen that way. There were about ten blue priests here, and who knew how far their extended families went. It would be impossible to deny all of their advances in my weak position. A shudder ran down my spine. I hadn’t thought of my future from that perspective. Benno had said that I would likely be kicked out in five years once the number of nobles began to increase again,

so I always thought I would just leave the temple when the time came. I would have been fine extending my lifespan with taues. I never thought that nobles would be after me as a convenient mother for their children.

“Laynobles will not have enough mana. You will likely be used as a tool to form connections with archnobles. Whether you end up as a prisoner kept alive to make children or as a wife with a respectable status within the family depends entirely on whether you can conduct yourself like a noble. Education is vital if you intend to protect yourself.”

“...Understood. I will make Rosina my attendant and educate myself as best I can.”

The High Priest replied with a firm “Good” and set his magic tool on the table. That signaled the end of that conversation. I set my magic tool down too and smiled at the High Priest.

“While you’re here, could you show me what you mean? I would like to know what degree of artistic ability is expected from a noble.” I pointed at the instrument and asked him to play it. He sighed as he put the magic tools away.

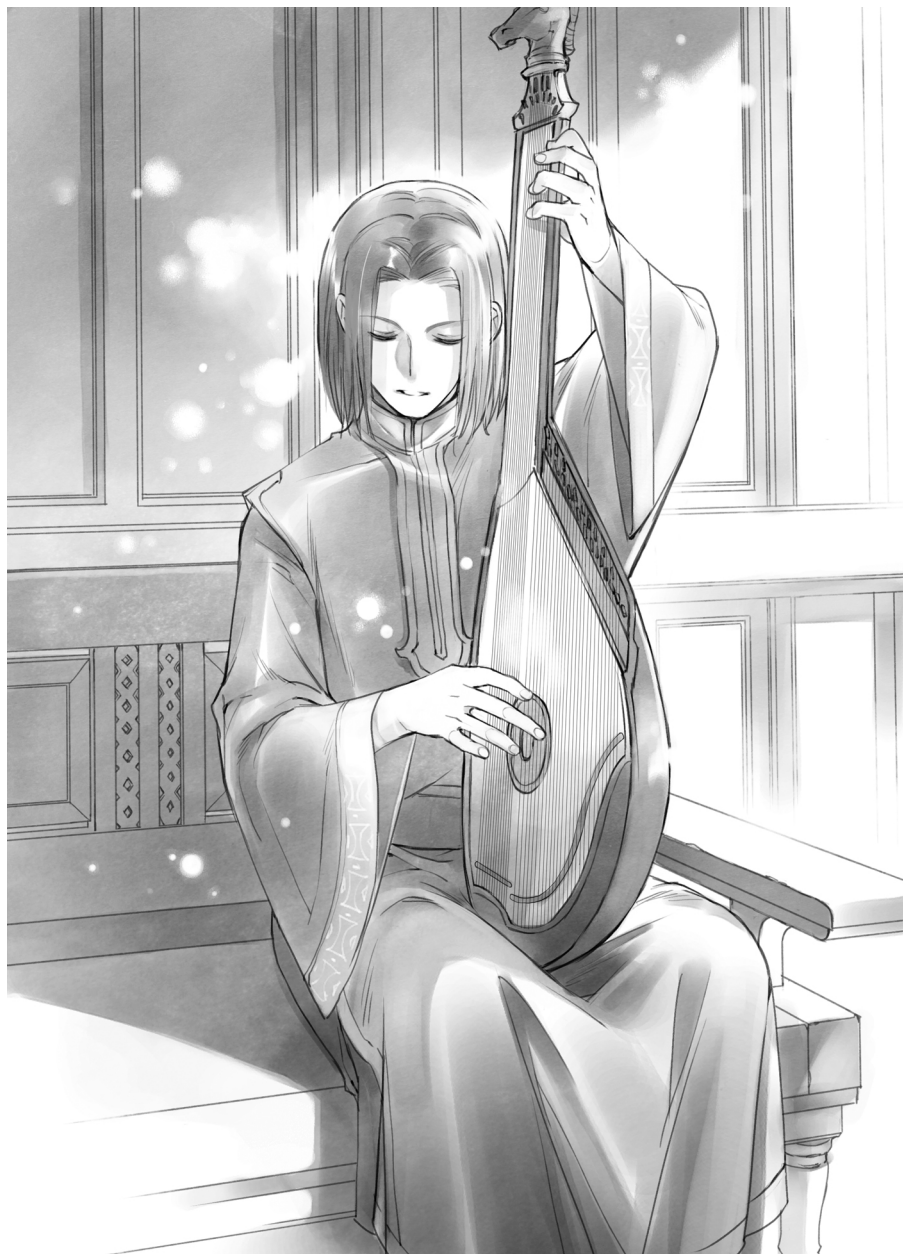
“Fran, bring me the harspiel.” The two instruments he had gifted me were apparently called harspiels. The larger one was for adults and the smaller one was for kids, as expected. It was like a combination of a lute and harp, most resembling a bandura. Its body was shaped like a pear cut in half, with the back half of it curving a bit. The front half had a sound hole like a guitar, which was as ornamental as it was functional. The adult-size one had straight lines decorating it, while the kid-size one had a pattern of growing vines.

At a glance, they seemed to have about fifty to sixty strings strung on them. The pins of the instrument which all the strings were wrapped around were made from something like ivory, giving more color to the wooden instrument. The head was adorned by a carving of a horse’s head, which made me want to joke about it being a morin khuur (a Mongolian horse-head fiddle), but that reference was just too obscure. Not that they would understand what I meant in this world anyway.

The High Priest adjusted his posture a bit, put his legs together, and rested the harspiel between his thighs a little. He supported the instrument’s neck with his left hand and plucked a string with his middle finger. The air trembled and music resembling a guitar’s reverberated through the room. He brushed his right hand’s fingers against the strings like one might play a harp, melting the air with high, clear notes.

The instrument had seemingly already been tuned, so the High Priest lowered his eyes with the harspiel in its position. His right hand

played the main notes while his left hand brought out the low notes that served as a bass. His longer fingers danced, starting a song I had never heard before. It was my first time hearing the instrument being played and I had never heard the song before, but I could immediately tell that the High Priest was an expert musician.



...He was good. The minstrels loitering around the east gate couldn't even compare.

Incidentally, I didn't like minstrels too much. The music didn't really resonate with me, and it was always hard to understand what they were singing. It felt like attending a fancy play as a child and catching nothing.

"The vast blue sky..." The High Priest began to sing with the song. It was a song about growing plants and praising the sun's blessing, and the lyrics readily brought forth images of a lively summer landscape. I had always thought he had a deep voice that carried well, but when he began to sing, it became almost frighteningly beautiful. Maybe this was normal for songs you hadn't heard before, but I found myself absorbed in it and completely focused on listening to the lyrics. When the final chord was struck, I couldn't help but let out an awed gasp. The High Priest handed the harspiel to Fran.

"That should do it. What did you think, Myne?"

"I think no girl would reject you if you sang a song of love to them."

"What is wrong with you?" The High Priest glared at me, which made me realize I had accidentally said what I was thinking with no filter. I hurriedly put a hand over my mouth and tried to recover.

"It was such a beautiful song that I found myself absorbed in it. But I don't think I'll be able to play on that high of a level."

"Education is not accomplished overnight. You will need to practice on a daily basis. Give it a try."

I naturally had no way of escaping the studious High Priest, and thus a music lesson began out of nowhere.

Rosina and Harspiels

Fran handed me the smaller harspiel meant for children to practice with. Even so, it was surprisingly large given my small frame. The child's harspiel had a lot fewer strings than the adult's—probably around half as many—which gave it the range of a practice keyboard I had played in elementary school.

I put it between my thighs as the High Priest had done and rested it on my left upper arm. It was mostly made of wood instead of anything too heavy, so I could hold it up just fine despite my weakness.

"It will get increasingly heavy if you hold it diagonally. Try to keep it perfectly upright." Maybe due to it being a practice instrument, one of the strings was colored. "This is the fundamental sound of the instrument," said the High Priest while plucking that one string.

On the "do-re-mi" scale, it was a do. Skip a string and the next was re, then skip another string and that was mi. The thin strings were lined up right next to each other, each a half-tone apart, but the way each one played a unique tone made it feel like plucking a piano's strings directly. But unlike a piano, there were no black keys, which made searching for specific sounds incredibly difficult.

"Consider this a musical scale. The sounds get increasingly high or increasingly low on each side."

I understood the musical scale by converting it to the do-re-mi scale I was more familiar with. I had been forced into it, but in my Urano days I had practiced piano for about three years. It would be difficult to get used to playing smoothly, but I would probably be able to play the more simple songs I remembered from back then.

"Sah ee tah... Sah ee tah..." While matching this world's language, I clumsily played the classic song "Tulip" and nodded in satisfaction.

"What in the world was that song?" murmured the High Priest.

"As you heard, a song about flowers." No tulips existed here as far as I knew, but it would be fine. It wasn't like the High Priest knew every flower to have ever existed. And sure enough the High Priest fell into thought, a finger on his chin.

"...Perhaps, of all things, you have a talent for music?"

"No, I don't! Not even a little bit!"

Oh no, oh no oh no oh no. I just raised his expectations super high!

Making up a new song and playing it the first time you ever touch an instrument? From an outside perspective, that's the kind of thing Mozart would do! Don't look at me like I'm a genius. Please no. The only songs I have memorized are the school anthems and some basic piano songs. I don't have any talent for music at all.

"That is not something you can decide for yourself. To be honest, I was concerned that a commoner would struggle to play at all, but it seems it won't be long before your music is presentable." Despite my desperate denials, the High Priest began forming plans with the hint of a devious smile on his face. Plans that no doubt involved taking huge cuts out of my reading time.

"Um, High Priest. I have no intention of letting my reading time get cut down any further."

"But daily practice is essential for learning to play an instrument."

"Yes, I know. I still won't give up any of my reading time."

Between checking on the orphanage, keeping tabs on the Myne Workshop, helping the High Priest, and Fran being busy, I barely got any time in the book room no matter how often I came to the temple. My meal time was strictly managed and the books couldn't be borrowed due to their chains, so I was reading a lot less in the temple than I had initially anticipated.

"When I joined the temple, you said my work would be offering mana and organizing the book room. I'm only helping you with your paperwork out of the goodness of my heart. You can give up some of that time to make room for my harspiel practice, but I will never give up my reading time for it."

We glared at each other for a bit, and after weighing paperwork and music on an internal scale, the High Priest seemed to decide that music was more important. He told me to dedicate all the time up until third bell to practicing the harspiel after arriving at the temple.

"Inform Wilma and Rosina of what has been decided today. As a note, I will occasionally come to check on your progress, so keep that in mind as you dedicate yourself to practice. I will find out immediately if you try to slack," he said, driving his point home. The High Priest was right to expect no better from me; there was no way I would take music seriously without constant observance.

After seeing him off, Fran and I had to go to the orphanage. "Gil, Delia. We're going to the orphanage now, so please prepare a room for Rosina."

"You got it. That room's gonna be spotless by the time you get back."

After arriving at the dining hall, we called for Wilma and Rosina. Everyone likely knew why they were being called. The orphans were looking at me anxiously.

“Sister Myne, are you making Wilma your attendant? Is Wilma going to leave us?”

“I am making Wilma my attendant, but as orphanage director, I will have Wilma keep working in the orphanage. Her job will be taking care of you all.”

“Yaaay! Really? She’s not leaving us?” The cheering kids went racing towards Wilma, who had just come down to the dining hall.

“She said you can work in the orphanage, Wilma!” The kids pulled Wilma’s clothes and arms as they flocked around her. She walked towards us with a happy smile, children hanging off of her. It seemed she meant a lot to the kids. I was really glad I managed to let her stay in the orphanage.

I asked the kids to leave and remain quiet until our conversation was over. The kids lined up against the wall like a wave crashing against a cliff, but nonetheless stared in our direction with happy smiles.

“I received the High Priest’s permission for your request, so I will make you my attendant. Your job will be to maintain the orphanage and draw art. Since that includes taking care of the young children, you will remain in the orphanage.”

With that done, Wilma could continue living in the girls’ building of the orphanage. She wouldn’t be taken by any blue priests, nor would she be forced to offer flowers. Wilma’s peaceful brown eyes shined with happy tears.

“I thank you ever so much. I will serve you with all I have, Sister Myne.”

Just as things with Wilma settled down, Rosina arrived in the dining hall. She had chestnut hair that was wavy like Tuuli’s, braided in a half-up style. Her lively blue eyes were gleaming with hope and anticipation.

“Sister Myne, I was told you wished to discuss something.” Rosina had the mature, pretty face of an adult. Her luxurious hair matched her graceful behavior, making her seem exactly like a dignified young lady from a wealthy family. From the way Wilma and Rosina carried themselves, I could imagine how their former mistress, a lover of the arts, probably behaved.

...The High Priest probably wants me to conduct myself like Rosina does. I knew that, but different people were suited for different things. Would I have to be trained until every move I made was beautiful, all the while being compared to my well-raised attendants? The thought made me give a heavy sigh.

“Rosina, I would like to make you my attendant.” Rosina covered her mouth in disbelief, her cheeks blushing a rosy red. I lowered my eyes. If I did what she just did, people would laugh at me. “The High

Priest is trying to educate me and suggested I make you my attendant. Your job will be to teach me to play the harspiel until third bell, then do whatever it is my other attendants are doing. What do you think?"

"Certainly, I have no objection whatsoever. The harspiel is my most practiced instrument." With the conversation over, I left the orphanage with a happy Rosina in tow as Wilma and the kids saw us off. She had no possessions in the orphanage. Orphans owned only their bodies and would simply move to their new room, where their master would prepare what they needed.

After returning to my chambers and gathering my attendants on the first floor, Fran led introductions between everyone. It seemed that a master was not meant to see communions between their attendants and thus I waited on the second floor. Fran told me not to peep, even if I got curious.

With nothing else to do, I started skimming a piece of sheet music that the High Priest had left behind. Learning to play this song was my first task. It wasn't that long, but learning to play a song you weren't familiar with wasn't easy.

Eventually, I heard Gil say "I'm gonna go check to see if the workshop's cleaned and locked up," followed by the sound of someone leaving. The introductions on the first floor were apparently over, and I could hear the others climbing the stairs to take Rosina to her room.

"Oh my! A harspiel... Sister Myne, do you mind if I play at once?" Rosina's voice dripped with emotion after she saw the two harspiels resting next to each other.

"Geez, Rosina! The instruments won't run away. You should get settled in your room first."

"I understand how emotional it can be to finally find what you've been looking for, but Delia's right," I said. "Please get settled in your room first. It shouldn't take too long, as there isn't much there."

I wanted to give Rosina permission to play since she reminded me of myself after finding the book room, but I couldn't let her play while Delia was there to help her settle in. Rosina went inside her room while looking wistfully at the harspiels.

"Sister Myne, may I play the harspiel?"

Rosina had speedily finished setting up her room, so this time I nodded. Her blue eyes sparkled happily as she took the harspiel in hand. Her dainty fingertips stroked the strings, plucking one of them. A high-pitched sound reverberated through the room and Rosina shut her eyes, blissfully absorbing the sensation of the single note spreading throughout the air.

Rosina sat on a chair and readied the harspiel. Her slender fingers were a bit beaten up from the menial labor she had done in the

orphanage, but they nonetheless began to gently caress the string with a soft touch, playing a terribly faint yet beautiful sound. Despite playing the same instrument, the music sounded entirely different from what the High Priest had played, perhaps due to their different personalities, or perhaps due to the different songs. The song she sang in a high-pitched voice wasn't one I knew, as expected, but her teary eyes and happy smile made it clear that she was overflowing with the joy of playing music again.

"That was a spectacular performance, Rosina."

"I'm honored. I'm just so happy that I get to play again... I will serve you with all my heart, Sister Myne."

And so, I got two new attendants, at the cost of daily harspiel practice being added to my schedule.

The next day, I went to the gate with Dad. Lutz was going to the temple ahead of us to get the orphans, and we planned to go to the forest after meeting up with them at the gate.

"Is it a boy? Is it a girl? Which would you want, Dad?" As of late, my conversations with Dad always ended up being about the baby. I did the same to Tuuli, which was probably why she wouldn't talk to me much, always telling me to go talk to Dad instead.

"...Tough call. If it's a boy, I'll get an ally in the house, but if it's a girl, she'll be cute."

"I think either will be cute! I'm gonna make lots of picture books to read to them!"

"You're right, you're right."

Not long after reaching the gate, Lutz arrived with the orphanage children in tow.

"Lutz, take good care of Myne."

"I know. Today, that guy's gonna carry her." Lutz pointed at an especially tall boy among the orphans. I would be a nuisance if I walked at my normal pace, so after the tall boy crouched and let me get on his back, we were off.

"This's the first time you're going to the forest with us, huh?" said Gil with excitement. I nodded. I hadn't gone to the forest at all after becoming a shrine maiden. It would be too much of a burden on Lutz, who already had to watch over all the orphans. I could finally go this time since they were bringing someone strong enough to easily carry me, and because everyone was used to the forest now.

"Let's gather taues and harvest more wood. We need wood for the winter and money for food."

Winter preparations were a big deal just for a family of four, so who knew how much they would cost for an entire orphanage. They could compensate a bit with divine blessings, but I didn't know how

much of those they would need. It was only recently that they started gathering firewood in the forest, and putting aside thin branches, thick logs needed a couple of years to dry before they could be used as firewood. This year we would largely be buying the firewood.

“Man, it’ll be great if we get to stay in a warm room all winter without starving. But the river’ll freeze in the winter, right? We won’t be able to make paper or go to the forest. What’ll we do then?” Gil pouted, annoyed. The children had spent their whole lives stuck in the orphanage. They had lately started going to the forest to make paper, but once winter came they would be stuck in the orphanage once again.

“We’ll need to think about winter handiwork you can do in the orphanage.” Our contract with Corinna let Tuuli and Mom make hairpins for their handiwork, but it didn’t mention anything about the orphanage children. I would need to think of different handiwork for them.

After arriving at the forest, I was stuck waiting at the meeting point like always. I killed time picking up nearby twigs and eating ripe fruit until everyone finished foraging and came back. They had found four taues. An enormous number of them were gathered during the star festival and the swollen, water-filled fruit would burst easily if stepped on by an animal, so not many were left.

I took the taues they handed to me and poured mana in. By now I was kinda used to seeing them morph before my eyes. The kids all readied their knives and blades, prepared for battle.

“Alright, I choose you! Stretchy tree thingy!” I threw the tau fruit and it started to grow, shooting seeds everywhere. That was the end of my job. I fell back and waited for everyone to take care of the rest.

I sat on a large rock and started to think about winter handiwork, while feeling subtly impressed by how much the kids were used to chopping up wood now. First, I thought about what I did last year. I was pretty sure I had been busy making hairpins and teaching Lutz.

...Ah! Studying might be a good idea. Why not use all that time locked up to teach the kids to read? I could prepare stone slates and learning resources, then turn a room in the orphanage into a classroom for learning to read, write, and do math. They would have to learn all of that anyway once they became attendants, so starting earlier would be fine. Even if some of them didn’t become attendants, it wouldn’t hurt to know. The Myne Workshop would one day make books, and first I would raise the literacy of its workers.

...In which case, maybe the picture books I was having Wilma draw would be best as children’s bibles. If I changed the language of the bible to be simpler for kids to read and understand, the orphanage kids would definitely learn faster than they would with normal stories.

And if I was going to be making picture books for teaching, I really wanted to create a system for mass production. Drawing the art individually for each book would be a nightmare.

Printing, hm? Letter presses would be difficult without a lot of adult arm strength, so maybe I should go with mimeographs for the kids? Johann from the smithy could make the styluses for the mimeographs no problem, but I would need to think about how to make the stencil. Even making wax paper would be a task, since winter preparations time was the busiest time of the year for wax workshops. They wouldn't have the time to play along with my experiments. But whether I went with letter presses or mimeographs, I wouldn't be able to finish making the tools I needed from scratch before winter came.

...What if I just do block printing, then? If I have Wilma draw art on a board, then have a carpentry workshop carve out that art as a relief, it should be pretty easy to mass produce picture books. I should make my first textbook have simplistic art. I can develop mimeograph printing for more complex printing as time goes on. But stencil paper has to come first before any of this, and making paper is the Myne Workshop's job.

"Alright, let's do it!" I stood up and pumped my first in the air, hyped to finally be making books, only to see Lutz staring at me with narrowed eyes as he finished putting trombe wood in a basket.

"Myne, don't forget to report and discuss your plans before acting on them."

D-Don't look at me like that, I was planning to talk to Benno tomorrow. I promise!

An Attendant's Job

To make books with woodblock printing, we first needed boards. I wanted to report this to Benno and order ten boards to turn into woodcuts—boards with the designs we wanted to print carved into them. To this end I went to see him, overflowing with enthusiasm, only for him to give me an extremely suspicious look.

“What’re you planning this time, Myne?”

But I was burning with such a righteous determination to create books that I shot a fist into the air, unperturbed by his suspicion. “Printing! I’m going to make picture books with (woodblock) printing. You can carve wood so that it has parts that are protruding and parts that are sunken in, right? If you cover that wood with a layer of ink, then only the protruding parts will touch the paper, which lets you print letters and art.”

I took out my slate, drew a cross-section of a bumpy piece of wood, drew a line of ink over it, then drew a piece of paper above that. Benno glared at the slate, then shook his head in exasperation.

“I get what you’re trying to say, but ink’s expensive. How much are you gonna need?” said Benno, making the blood drain from my face.

A single small bottle of ink would rip four small silvers from my hands, and although it cost less than parchment, plant paper was still expensive—the cost of using it rather than selling it weighed heavily. I had charged forward with my hype for books fueling me, but with the cost of materials in mind, I couldn’t afford to mass-produce picture books.

“I-I didn’t think about how much the materials would cost.”

“IDIOT! What merchant in the world doesn’t think about how much the materials cost?!”

“I-I’m not a merchant, I’m a shrine maiden. Ow! Oowww!”

He pinched my cheeks the second I tried arguing back. No mercy, not even for a little girl like me. Benno wasn’t very mature sometimes, in my opinion. I rubbed my cheek and looked up at him after he finally let it go.

“Please introduce me to an ink workshop so I can plan around prices and quantities. Worst-case scenario, I might need to make the ink myself. I might know how to make a kind of ink that’s good for printing, so...” It seemed there was still a long road ahead of me

before I could make books. My hype drained out of me with a sigh.

“You can make ink too?”

“I know how to make it, just like I know how to make paper. I wasn’t able to get all the materials I needed in the past, but now I think I can, especially with all the extra help I have now. I’ll need to go through some trial and error to work out the exact recipe, but well, it should be just a matter of time.”

“Oh...?”

On my way out of the store, Mark stopped me and reported that he had entrusted the karuta boards to Lutz. I signed for them, then walked to the temple with Lutz carrying them. Once there, I’d give them to Wilma and have her draw another set. I could hardly wait to see her angelic smile again.

When I arrived at the temple, I found Gil—not Fran—waiting for me at the gate. His expression brightened with relief when he saw me.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve waited for me at the gate, Gil. The workshop has kept you so busy. Did something happen?”

“...Delia’s waiting for you, Sister Myne, and she looks ticked as heck. Fran’s holding her back for now, but she could explode at any second. She’s gonna shoot out complaints like growy tree things shoot out their roots,” said Gil with a shrug, and I immediately felt as if the world had frozen over.

“...What happened?”

“That new attendant you got... Rosina, I think? She’s kinda, uh...” Gil let out a tired sigh and started walking. Something must have happened between Delia and Rosina while I was at the forest yesterday. Maybe there were some territorial struggles going on amongst the attendants, like how old pets might not get along with new ones.

...I’ve never actually owned any pets before, I’ve just read books on them. Will I know how to handle this? I arrived at my chambers while thinking about tangentially related things, and Gil opened the door for me. The sound of a harspiel was reverberating throughout the room, which was definitely out of the ordinary.

I climbed the steps feeling a little more graceful and dignified than usual. Despite Gil’s warning, I let my guard down since I didn’t hear Delia storming down the steps and the music made me feel regal.

“GEEEEEEZ!”

“Hyah?!” The second Delia saw me she let out an ear-busting “geez” that left me blinking in surprise while looking around the room. I could see Rosina sitting down and continuing to play the harspiel, looking completely unfazed.

“Sister Myne! Rosina won’t do any work at all!” Delia pointed a sharp finger at Rosina and let loose another angry “geez.” I looked at

Rosina, but she kept her eyes on the harspiel.

“Good morning, Rosina.”

“Good morning, Sister Myne. Isn’t the weather today just lovely?” Only after I spoke to Rosina did she stop playing the instrument and look my way. The way she entirely ignored Delia’s existence told me just how frustrated they were with each other.

“Rosina, it seems that Delia is angry. What does she mean when she says you won’t do any work?”

“Oh my, that is such a deceptive way to put it.” Rosina tilted her head elegantly and Delia basically gnashed her teeth while taking out my blue robes from the closet.

“It’s true! You don’t do anything except play that instrument! You won’t listen no matter what Fran says! Sister Myne, please do something about this!” Delia started to dress me a little more aggressively than usual.

Rosina prepared my harspiel while smiling a dignified smile, unaffected by Delia’s anger. “It is my duty as an attendant to practice the harspiel. Sister Myne, pay no heed to this girl that knows nothing of what a shrine maiden’s work demands. Let us begin our practice.”

“Geez! Now’s not the time to be playing instruments!”

I heard Delia’s anger loud and clear, but I did need to practice until third bell. No doubt I would run out of practice time if I kept listening to them argue.

“Delia, my harspiel practice lasts until third bell, and it is Rosina’s duty to teach me to play. We can discuss the details after practice. I will hear what you have to say when I have the time.”

“...Understood.” Delia went off to do her own work, still pouting with frustration. She spun around right at the steps and yelled “We’re definitely going to talk about this!” just to drive the point home.

“Sister Myne, there is no need for you to listen to her nonsense.”

“I’m afraid that in times of conflicting opinions, I need to hear the sides of all parties involved. The High Priest was very firm about this.”

“...I see.” Rosina’s expression clouded a little with dissatisfaction, but a smile returned to her face when we began practicing.

When third bell rang and my harspiel practice ended, I had to go to the High Priest’s room to help with his paperwork. Rosina cleaned up the harspiels for me while I rang a bell to summon Fran. He climbed to the second floor after gathering all the tools we would need for the paperwork.

“Well then, I’m off to assist the High Priest. Please draw water with Delia while I’m gone.”

“Oh my, Sister Myne. What do you mean? That is the work of gray priests, is it not?” Rosina opened her eyes in disbelief, but I was more

confused than her. My only gray priests were Fran and Gil. Fran was handling all the administrative matters that came with being a blue shrine maiden, while Gil was running the workshop. They were both busy working outside of my chambers. Rosina was nearing adulthood, so my plans had been for her to slowly take over Fran's more menial labor over time, but I didn't know what jobs she could be trusted with yet. Which was why I had intended for her to do work with Delia.

"Gil and Fran are busy with their own work. Did Fran not inform you that you would be working with Delia for now?" I said, leading Delia to sweep back her crimson red hair and grin victoriously.

"See? I told you that our job was to take water to the second floor."

"But such manual labor is the work of men, is it not?" Rosina put a hand on her cheek, eyes wide with surprise. I was sure that Delia had said she would teach Rosina to do housework while she was still an apprentice attendant. I had distributed work based on that, but Rosina's attitude was making me nervous.

Rosina went on, "Is it not true that manual labor and errands are the work of men, while the work of women is to hone their artistic talents? I would understand if I were still in the orphanage, but now that I have become the attendant of an apprentice blue shrine maiden, I do not see why I should be expected to do manual labor. Physical work will only harm my fingers, no?"

"Harm your fingers? You're not a blue shrine maiden, stop acting like one!"

"Manual labor is best left for whatever priest is most nearby. Or at worst an apprentice shrine maiden who lacks any artistic talent, such as that one attendant of yours." Rosina was smiling with a voice like sweet ringing bells, but her position was no laughing matter. I could understand why Delia got so mad. This kind of attitude had no place among my attendants.

"Rosina, mornings will be dedicated to music practice, but I believe I told you to do work with the other attendants after practice is over. Please work with Delia."

"Sister Myne! What are you saying?!" Rosina pleaded that such things were not the work of a gray shrine maiden, but I deflected all her protests.

"I am still largely uneducated in the ways of the temple. After lunch, I will ask everyone their thoughts and make my decision then." My personal thoughts were *that was then, this is now*, but I couldn't say for sure whether Delia was right, Rosina was right, or neither of them were right. I couldn't just say what came to mind before asking Fran and the High Priest about what they thought. For now, I would stage a temporary retreat until I had more information.

I looked up at Fran as we walked to the High Priest's room. Delia's rage had been so all-consuming that I missed the chance to ask anyone else what they thought.

"Fran, what are your thoughts on Rosina's position?"

"Sister Christine, Wilma and Rosina's former master, was somewhat unorthodox—she valued the fine arts above all else. She dedicated herself to poetry, loved art, and submerged herself in music every day without fail. The shrine maidens serving her as attendants, even the apprentices, were taught to have the grace and elegance of noble ladies. Sister Christine had a strong tendency to show favoritism to those skilled in the arts, so I imagine that Rosina would have lived a life entirely like a blue shrine maiden thanks to her musical talents."

"She spent every day with poetry, art, and music? That explains why Rosina is so dignified." Delia and Gil had said it was common sense for gray shrine maidens to strive to be mistresses, so I thought all gray shrine maidens would feel the same. But the favoritism Rosina had been shown as a blue shrine maiden's resident musician had turned her into an attendant who didn't see the need to do any work herself. That honestly surprised me.

"Did something happen, Myne? You're late." The High Priest glared at me the second I arrived.

"...I know that it is rude for me to ask this unannounced, High Priest, but what exactly is expected of an attendant?"

The High Priest looked at Fran before answering me. He didn't even need to say anything for Fran to begin concisely explaining the positions of Rosina and Delia. Naturally, even the High Priest was caught off guard by Rosina's unwillingness to do any work unrelated to music.

"...I see. I had been impressed by how cultured and dignified she was despite being a mere apprentice gray shrine maiden, and I see now that is because she had been living a life more cultured than even the daughter of a laynoble family."

"Um, High Priest. What kind of person was Sister Christine?" The High Priest stood up and pulled a book off a shelf. It seemed to be a register of sorts for blue priests and shrine maidens. He flipped through the pages before pausing and running a long finger across a particular page.

"Here she is. Christine was the daughter of a favored mistress, but had such a high amount of mana that her father wished to formally take custody of her. His wife firmly disagreed, so he sent her to the temple for her own protection while she grew up." He shut the book and handed it to Arno. "He sent tutors to educate and culture her while she was here, so that he could take her back into the family

whenever the opportunity arose. I recall that she was treated entirely unlike the blue priests sent here due to their lack of mana or their family's poverty."

Rosina had been a unique attendant brought up under a unique blue shrine maiden. It should be safe to say that her perspective would differ from that of most apprentice gray shrine maidens.

"I do not have the compassion nor the spare wealth to support an attendant that will not do work outside of music. Would it be safe to order Rosina to do the same work Delia does?" I didn't need an attendant living an easier life than mine, just playing a harspiel day in and day out. I was holding myself back from spending all day reading in the library, so...

"It is a matter of course that different masters will expect different things from their attendants. Did Fran say nothing to her?" questioned the High Priest, to which Fran shook his head regretfully.

"She would not listen. Rosina does not understand that she is just an apprentice, and she even attempts to order me around. It seems that she truly looks down upon gray priests."

"Ah, that won't do at all." My chambers functioned thanks to Fran's precise command. An attendant who didn't obey Fran's orders was of absolutely no use to me. So much so that I wanted to just send her back to the orphanage immediately.

"Perhaps the most troubling thing is that she plays her instrument late into the night. I could bear it the first night, knowing that she was likely enthused to be reunited with music, but by the second night she had crossed a line. If it was difficult for me to bear on the first floor, I can only imagine how Delia felt in the room beside her."

Not only did Rosina refuse to do the work expected of an attendant, she was even noisy at night. Unbelievable.

"High Priest, can I send Rosina back to the orphanage? If not, I would like for you to take her. I will pay a tutor fee if you send her to my chambers only during my lessons."

"I do not need an attendant who will not obey their master's orders," said the High Priest. Fran and I looked at each other, then nodded.

"I will have a discussion with all my attendants after lunch. I would like to talk to Wilma before then. Please forgive my rudeness, but might I leave early to do so?"

"Certainly. It is important to hear the thoughts of all those involved. You may go."

With the High Priest muttering "Has she matured? No, it is too early to say for sure" behind me, I left and headed to the orphanage. Wilma had served the same mistress as Rosina, so perhaps she would offer a perspective in support of her.

I sent Fran to get the karuta boards from my room while I talked with Wilma in the dining hall. She would probably find it easier to talk without him, an adult man, standing nearby.

“And that is the situation. I intend to hear all my attendants out in the afternoon. As you cannot come to my room, I would like to ask for your thoughts ahead of time. Would you, too, decline manual labor given your history as Sister Christine’s attendant?” Wilma had been the first one to rush to washing the dirty children. It was hard for me to imagine she would avoid manual labor, but who knew what she would say.

“Sister Myne, my duty is to take care of the children. I would not last if I refused to do manual labor.” Wilma looked at me and spoke quietly. The strong will in her peaceful eyes made me sigh in relief before continuing my questioning.

“In that case, is it only Rosina who is so opposed to the idea of doing manual labor?”

“Rosina’s thoughts on the matter are much stronger than those of other gray shrine maidens. I became an apprentice attendant at the age of ten, but Rosina was taken from the orphanage as soon as she came of age, so until returning there she did next to no manual labor whatsoever. Gray priests certainly did do all the chores and manual labor while she served Sister Christine.”

Rosina had been young during the period where there were still gray shrine maidens around to take care of the pre-baptism kids. Since they had looked over her and she had become an apprentice attendant immediately after her baptism, she didn’t grow up doing manual labor. Her upbringing was a lot more privileged than mine and most commoners’.

“Sister Christine was dedicated to the arts. The status of attendants is normally decided by age, but in her case, she prioritized artistic talent. It all seemed so natural back then.” Which was exactly why Rosina had become so dedicated to music. She wanted to please her mistress.

“When Sister Christine returned to noble society and Rosina was sent back to the orphanage, she was shocked at the different lifestyle expected of her. I too only knew how special our circumstances had been after returning to the orphanage and discussing matters with the other attendants.” Wilma had been able to accept that her circumstances were an abnormality thanks to the fact that she had experienced doing manual labor up until the age of ten, but Rosina just averted her eyes from the harsh reality.

“Rosina always seemed obsessed with returning to a life where she needed only play music. I am sure that deep down, she knew that even if a blue priest took her under their wing, things would never be

the same as they were. But she must have convinced herself that you would be different, Sister Myne. That you would understand and provide.”

“Thank you for your valuable perspective, Wilma. Here are the karuta for the orphanage. Please work your artistic magic on them.” Upon noticing that Fran was back, I left the karuta art to Wilma and stood up. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and lowered her hips slightly.

“Sister Myne, if you would, please give Rosina time to correct herself.”

“...Your requests mean a lot to me, Wilma. I will see what I can do.” And I would, but I had no intention of keeping her around if she wouldn’t do any work. As I told Gil and the orphanage children, those who do not work shall not eat.

Rosina’s circumstances had been unique and out of the ordinary. No doubt the meeting of attendants would end up with everybody ganging up on her like a mob. I finished lunch with a heavy heart, then waited for my attendants to finish while I memorized some prayers.

“Now then, Sister Myne,” began Delia. “Thank you for listening to what I have to say. First, the harspiel is so, so, so annoying! Second, Rosina won’t do her work. She’s the worst attendant ever! I can’t believe her!” She must have been holding all of that in for a long time. Delia’s blue eyes burned with fury as she began ranting, the dam finally having burst. She unleashed complaint after complaint, feeling indeed just like a growy tree thing shooting out roots. I honestly couldn’t help but smile in amusement at the sheer energy of her tirade.

Delia basically said the same things repeatedly, so to summarize: Rosina played the harspiel late into the night, making music so loud Delia couldn’t sleep. She wouldn’t get herself up in the morning, she wouldn’t do any manual labor at all. She wouldn’t even listen to Fran, my chamber’s head attendant.

“I understand your position, Delia. What do you think, Gil?”

“The music’s annoying as heck, she doesn’t listen to people, she doesn’t work. I dunno why she gets to eat at all.” The principle of working for one’s own food had firmly established itself in Gil. He seemed annoyed that Rosina got to be an attendant despite not doing an attendant’s work.

“Do you feel the same way, Fran?”

“Largely. The harspiel being played late at night is certainly irritating, and the fact that she does not wake up in the morning is no help. During the day she just sits and plays music without listening to any instructions given.”

I looked at Rosina. She was sitting upright and smiling calmly despite everyone badmouthing her. That was a relief, since I had thought that she might burst into tears after being hit with so much criticism at once.

“Rosina, your thoughts on their criticism?” I asked, and Rosina tilted her head gracefully with a composed smile.

“It is natural that I dedicate myself to teaching you the harspiel, Sister Myne. Manual labor would only hurt my fingers. I find it sad that your attendants do not understand at all the importance of the fine arts despite serving an apprentice shrine maiden.” As expected, Rosina’s perspective was founded in her experience serving Christine.

“Your dedication to music is appreciated, but playing late into the night is disrespectful towards everyone. Stop playing at seventh bell, and wake up in the morning at the same time as everyone else.”

“...Understood. However, Sister Mine, I would respectfully like for you to deepen your own appreciation towards music. I believe you would understand my position if you knew more of the fine arts,” complained Rosina as she let out a tragic sigh. Unfortunately for her, I only wanted the bare minimum of education necessary to get cultured. Books were my fine art. Reading was my true calling.

“Rosina, I cannot give you what your former mistress gave you.” I looked at Rosina and straightened my back to give off as much masterly gravitas as I could muster. I may not have been much like other apprentice blue shrine maidens, but Rosina wasn’t like a normal attendant either. If she didn’t become aware of that, she would experience conflict with her next master as well.

“I do not have the leeway to support an attendant that only plays music. Wilma is working in the orphanage, drawing important art while taking care of the children. You, too, will need to do work other than just playing music. I understand that your hands are important for your instruments, but at the very least you will need to do administrative work.” As it stood, Delia and Gil could keep my chambers clean and running by themselves. I would most like for her to take a share of Fran’s work—dealing with paperwork and managing the financial ledgers related to my chambers, the orphanage, and the workshop.

“You will be an adult soon, Rosina, so I imagine you can read and write? You will need to do paperwork for me.”

Rosina put a hand on her cheek and tilted her head, saying that she had never done paperwork. She was looking away from me with her blue eyes, as if saying she had no intention of listening to me.

“There is a difference between having not done something before and being unable to do something. You can learn. There are a lot of things I don’t know either. But in the end, I do not want or need an

attendant that will refuse to work at all.”

Rosina looked at me and blinked slowly. I looked back into her deep blue eyes and gave her my final warning.

“Think of your answer by tomorrow morning, Rosina. Will you return to the orphanage, or will you accept that serving me will not be the same as serving Sister Christine? No matter what happens, I cannot become Sister Christine for you.”

The next day, Rosina said—with her eyes puffy and red—that she would work hard to serve as my attendant, and began learning to do paperwork and math despite her struggles with both.

Delia was pursing her lips unhappily over having to keep taking care of the second floor herself, but she seemed pleased that Rosina was helping to lighten Fran’s load. Rosina also stopped playing late into the night, and I noticed that Delia had started secretly enjoying the music and looking at the harpsiels. I suggested that she ask Rosina to teach her if she wanted, which made her mad, but it was probably just a matter of time.

With that out of the way, it was time for me to spend every day gawking at just how inelegant and unrefined I was compared to Rosina. Every step and gesture she took was a reminder of how further ahead she was than me. When Rosina walked it was like she was elegantly dancing across a stage, each of her movements flowing like water, never going too fast or too slow. There was a peculiar rhythm to it all. The way she tilted her head, held a pen, brushed aside her clothing... Everything seemed as if she was using every ounce of focus to look as elegant as possible, but none of it seemed forced in the least. It was all completely natural.

“Will I ever learn to carry myself as elegantly as you, Rosina?”

“Math is much harder than acting elegant. What I want to know is how you developed your mathematical talents at such a young age, Sister Myne.” Rosina and I looked at each other, then laughed. We both had to practice to overcome our weak points.

Delia and I learned to carry ourselves more elegantly, with Rosina watching and giving us pointers. Delia learned much faster than me, since she still had the goal to one day become a mistress.

In the midst of all that, a lunch invitation arrived from the High Priest. The date was scheduled ten days from now, and in the letter he stated that I should bring my instrument so that he could see the fruits of my learning. The blood drained from Rosina’s face and our practicing intensified until, three days later, I could play the High Priest’s first song without any issues.

...Specific goals and tight deadlines sure do make people grow fast, huh? I rewarded Rosina for her efforts in teaching me with outside

clothes, and rewarded Wilma for finishing the karuta with a bundle of paper to use for sketches.

The Italian Restaurant's Interior Decoration

“Benno, when do you think you’ll be able to take me to an ink workshop?” I wanted to try making ink before winter came, and I wanted to do research at an ink workshop before starting anything. I stopped by Benno’s store on my way to the temple to ask about this, only for him to shake his head.

“The ink can wait. Construction on the restaurant should be done soon. I want to talk about the decoration a bit more,” Benno said. “The outside of the restaurant’s all finished. The interior comes next and I want to hear about what kinda tapestries, art, and so on are used in the nobility’s section of the temple. Bring Fran with you, no matter what.”

Benno’s tone made it sound like he wanted Fran’s opinion first and foremost, with me just being an afterthought. I couldn’t blame him; I wasn’t particularly well versed on what kind of interior decoration nobles liked.

Suddenly, it hit me—I had another attendant who was probably well-informed about decoration and aesthetics. “Benno, should I bring my new attendant to talk about decoration? Her name’s Rosina and she’s a gray shrine maiden who was especially favored by an art-loving noble, to the point that she had an upbringing more privileged than a lot of laynobles. I’m sure she’ll be able to provide the kind of perspective a noble woman would have.”

Fran had been educated by the High Priest and knew much about the nobility’s proclivities, but suffered from a lack of flexibility. The High Priest himself had a tendency to dislike the unnecessary, his mindset embodied by the phrase *simple is best*. In contrast, Rosina had been showered in the culture of an art-loving shrine maiden. She had a playful air to her tastes and had a knack for presentation. The number of flowers in my chambers had grown ever since she arrived, and they were becoming increasingly presentable to visitors.

“Sounds good. I’ll bring a carriage to the temple tomorrow afternoon and we can go check out the restaurant. I’m gonna be sending Hugo there too, so do something about tomorrow’s food with whoever’s left.”

It hurt that he completely ignored my ink problems, but I was glad the restaurant was finally getting finished. Lutz and I headed to

the temple, chatting excitedly before arriving and telling everyone our plans for tomorrow.

“Benno will be sending a carriage tomorrow afternoon so that I might visit his restaurant. Fran, Rosina, would you be so kind as to accompany me?”

“Of course.”

“Furthermore, he would like Hugo to see the restaurant’s kitchen. Please give him tomorrow off and direct him to the Gilberta Company. Will the new chef be fine on his own? Todd, I believe?”

“I believe he will be fine, with Ella’s assistance.”

I conveyed the plans to the chefs through Fran. Todd seemed uneasy, but I figured he could manage since Hugo had been fine with just Ella up until now.

The next day, after lunch, I had Fran and Rosina change into their outside clothes while Delia helped me take off my blue robe and get me into my long-sleeved, noble-looking blouse. Given that Hugo would be at the restaurant, I needed to dress and act like a noble.

“I wish I could go too. Geez! I’m always the one left behind.”

“My apologies, Delia. I need Rosina’s informed opinion this time.” I tried to appease Delia as best I could while she helped me prepare with a vexed look in her eyes. Bringing Delia to the restaurant wasn’t in the cards, since I didn’t know just how much she would tell the High Bishop. Not to mention that Delia seemed to be conveniently forgetting that she was always left behind since she didn’t want to go to the orphanage and she would rather hone her skills than go to the forest, but oh well.

“Perhaps I will need to prepare a reward for your service in minding my chambers while I’m absent,” I said meaningfully, before heading to the carriage Benno had prepared with Fran and Rosina.

Fran was wearing his normal brown outfit, while Rosina was wearing a moss-green dress with a dark-green bodice covered in lined embroidery. It matched her wavy chestnut hair perfectly, and any way you looked at her, she was the model image of a rich young lady. I complimented her and she gave an embarrassed curtsy, saying I praised her too much. ...*She acts super cute even when embarrassed. Can I mimic that? No, definitely not.*

During the carriage ride, I explained to Rosina what the Italian restaurant was and what our job would be. “We want the Italian restaurant to feel like an eatery for nobles. Our intended demographic is the rich owners of large stores, so the interior decoration needs to be classy. I would like to hear your and Fran’s opinions on it, with the understanding that it should be similar to a dining hall nobles would use.”

“May I think of it as if I were decorating Sister Christine’s room?” asked Rosina, and I nodded. I asked Fran to think of it like he was decorating for the High Priest or the High Bishop.

“In that case, please take care not to provide any opinions of your own,” Fran warned. “Hugo will be there, and it would be best if you spoke through us.”

Things always got heated and foul-mouthed when Benno and I had business discussions. It seemed I would need to write my thoughts on my diptych today. ...*I really don’t want to become a noble girl. They don’t even get to talk when they want to.*

The bouncing, shaking carriage finally reached the restaurant. The outside construction had indeed been finished, and we found Lutz waiting for us at the entrance. I had to act like a noble, and he had to act like a merchant apprentice doing business with a noble. We both kept our backs straight and our eyes level. The fact that we didn’t just grin at each other was commendable, if you asked me.

“Thank you for graciously accepting our invitation, Sister Myne.” Lutz and I finished our farcical greetings, then stepped past the large, ornately carved wooden doors into the restaurant. Inside was a smallish hall that resembled the first floor of my chambers.

“This is the reception and waiting area. To the left is the kitchen and to the right is the dining hall,” explained Lutz while pointing to the left and right. The right side of the hallway had a rectangular opening in it, which I could imagine would be the future location of a door. Behind it was Benno, who came this way after noticing us.

“Thank you for coming, Sister Myne. This is the restaurant’s dining hall.” Benno also greeted me politely, as he would with a noble. The dining hall seemed to be based on my orphanage director chambers, since that was the noble abode he was most familiar with, but the result was an overwhelmingly white and featureless design.

“I intend to run a wainscot along the walls, but the one I ordered with fanciful reliefs carved into it has not yet been completed. It seems to be taking some time to finish.”

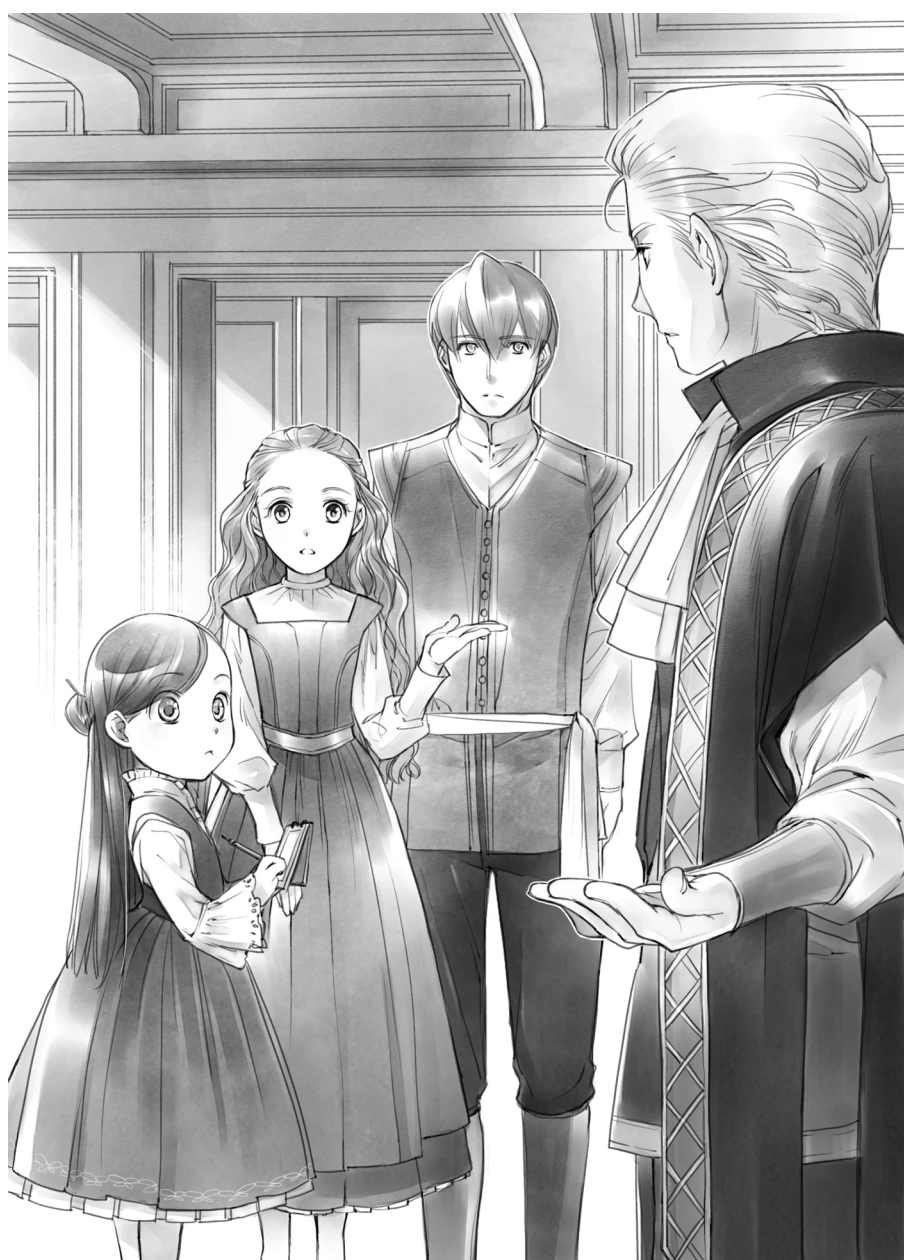
Unable to reply, I wrote “delivery date of wainscot” into my diptych.

“I have already decided on the wainscot and display shelves, but I do not know what art to display on the shelves. Sister Myne, I would be extremely grateful to hear your thoughts on what tapestries, art, sculptures, plants, and so on I should buy, as well as how to arrange them.” Despite saying he wanted to hear my thoughts, Benno looked straight at Fran and Rosina.

“What kind of display shelves do you have in mind?” asked Fran

“The contents of the shelves will depend on their height, width, and color,” added Rosina.

Benno answered their questions in stride. He knew what was popular among nobles since he regularly did business with them. But as expected, Rosina dominated the discussion when it came to art and how to present it. Then Fran would offer cheaper alternatives to her suggestions while gently holding her back when she suggested something too extravagant for a restaurant. Still unable to participate, I just dotted notes down on my diptych while listening to their discussion. An onlooker would surely struggle to tell which of us was the master.



“Sister Myne, what would you suggest we add?”

“...Only one thing comes to mind. Nothing would complete the restaurant aesthetic more than a bookshelf in the corner.”

Benno’s eyes shot open and, after stifling a scream of “*You idiot! How much money do you think that would cost?!*”, he glared at me.

“Sister Myne,” chided Rosina, “I do believe books are too expensive to buy for decoration.”

“If placed in the dining hall, the smell of the ink would carry over to the food.”

My shoulders fell as both my attendants rejected my idea. I knew it was unreasonable before I said it. But he asked what I suggested, and I wanted to be honest with my thoughts. If honesty wasn’t appreciated here, I would have to just shut my mouth and let my attendants do all the talking.

“Given that you intend to open the restaurant in the spring,” began Rosina, “perhaps you would be better off focusing on the carpet rather than tapestries? Noble rooms will always have carpet, so as to stifle the sounds of footsteps and serving carts.”

“It will be difficult to find thick carpet suitable for pushing serving carts over, but it will be well worth the price.”

They provided advice not only from the perspective of nobles, but from the perspectives of those serving the nobles. Benno and I both wrote down their thoughts in our diptychs. The conversation advanced smoothly, with the number of tables, number of chairs, leftover space to be kept in reserve, and so on all getting discussed.

“Regarding the tables,” said Fran, “I believe that removing the tablecloths and using napkins instead is an important step towards feeling more like somewhere a noble might eat. Napkins are like tablecloths cut into small squares so that diners can wipe their hands individually, and as of late the nobility use them almost exclusively.”

Fran’s words made my face light up. Tablecloths here weren’t used for decoration like they were back on Earth. They were used to rub food off your hands, to wipe your face, and even to blow your nose. A new tablecloth might look nice, but after repeated usage the filth became too baked in to remove. It was so unhygienic that it was actually causing dysentery and other diseases to spread.

“Fran, that is a spectacular idea,” I said. “Filthy tablecloths will only ruin the high-class atmosphere. With napkins sized for individual use, it will be trivial to replace dirty ones once they become impossible to clean. A restaurant must prioritize cleanliness above all else. Some diners will clean themselves on the tablecloths if given the opportunity, so our best option is to remove the tablecloths entirely and prepare napkins in their place.”

Benno nodded and stroked his chin in thought. Meanwhile, Rosina tapped my shoulder and signaled for me to stop talking. *Did I get too excited? Sorry, but I just hate the dirty tablecloths here. So, so much.*

Once we finished discussing the dining hall, we moved to the kitchen. It was largely identical to the one in my chambers, but larger. I looked around and saw Mark and Hugo talking. I had Fran ask how their discussions on the cooking tools, ingredients, and firewood had concluded.

“We have decided to order the same tools I have grown used to using in Sister Myne’s kitchen,” answered Hugo. I heard him loud and clear, but Fran repeated it to me before asking my thoughts.

“It’s good to prepare tools you’re used to using. But think carefully about how many of them to buy. For some tools, it’s better to buy many extras for when you’re too busy to clean them.” I whispered my thoughts Fran’s ears, and after he repeated them Hugo’s eyes shot open wide in shock, as if he had never considered that option. Mark was taking notes in his own diptych, which they had apparently made at some point.

“It would be wise to secure three separate avenues from which to buy fresh, good-tasting ingredients. You will also need a lot of wood to run the ovens, correct? Start securing a stockpile of it as soon as possible, without forgetting the possibility of ordering it from other cities.”

After finishing our discussion in the kitchen, we all got into the carriage—except for Mark and Hugo—and headed for the Gilberta Company. There we could discuss matters without reservation.

As soon as I entered the store, I tossed off my noble girl facade. Rosina winced, but if I had a business discussion with Benno like a noble, I would have no idea if he was understanding me or not. I raised a hand, my diptych open and ready.

“Okay, Benno. I’m going to ask about some things. You implied the wainscot was late, but when is it actually going to be finished? Isn’t it essential for the restaurant’s decoration? I don’t think you’ll be able to put up the art or display shelves without it.”

“The workshop’s hurrying, but it’s definitely not gonna be finished before winter. Can’t say I’m surprised, they’ve gotta do the doors and window panes too.”

Something about Benno’s elaboration seemed odd to me. I furrowed my brow in thought. “Ummm, wait, are you saying you ordered everything from the same workshop?”

“Naturally. You gotta stick with your partner workshop.” So he said, but it seemed to me that asking one workshop to make doors, window panes, wainscots, and so on—each with ornately carved reliefs—was just going to end up with them being overworked.

“Why not just split the orders between different carpentry workshops? It’ll take way too long if you ask one workshop to do everything. You would save a lot of time if you asked one workshop to do the wainscot, one to decorate the door, one to decorate the window panes, and another to make the display shelves.”

Apparently, it was normal to do what Benno did and form a partnership with a workshop that would do everything, no matter how long it took. I saved a lot of time setting up my workshop since I just bought materials that had already been made, which gave me a biased perception.

“I’ll trust that you know what you’re talking about, Benno. But most craftsmen will be able to do this kind of thing if you give them detailed instructions, so I think you’d be better off forming connections with multiple workshops.”

“...I’ll think about it.” Benno started writing something on a wooden board and I used the opportunity to check what was next on my list.

“What about tableware? Nobles don’t use wooden tableware much at all.”

“I’ve ordered some pewter plates, but they’re gonna be a while too. Takes a lot of time to make that many of the same thing. No helping this either, nobles don’t share.” In cheap restaurants it was normal to eat with your hands instead of utensils, and plates were made of hard bread. People even shared their utensils and plates when they had them, though less in recent times than before.

But nobles? Nobles were different. To match the style of nobles you needed tableware for each individual customer, which meant you had to make a bunch from scratch. Which was exactly why he should have split the orders between workshops to speed the process up.

“What if you used a different workshop for each table’s worth of tableware, maybe changing what kind you use depending on the price of the food...?”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself.” It seemed that ordering from multiple workshops at once really was frowned upon. With Benno glowering in front of me, I changed my suggestion.

“In that case, why not order silver and porcelain tableware as well, so it’s not all from the same kind of workshop?”

“That would be too expensive,” Benno said with a grimace.

“You can use them exclusively for higher class customers, to make them feel special. The plates and such can be put on display for decoration when not in use.”

“...That’s a good point. What do you two think?” Benno looked at Fran and Rosina. Fran spoke first.

“I believe that Sister Myne’s suggestion would be fairly effective.

Even nobles use different plates when serving guests of honor. However..."

According to Fran and Rosina, nobles brought their own utensils and cups with them when dining with others. They would brag about their quality, and some of them were family heirlooms passed down for generations. Tableware was a reflection of one's fortune. And apparently, most importantly of all, it was commonplace for nobles to bring even their own plates to lower the risk of being poisoned.

"Commoners definitely don't do anything like that," observed Benno.

"That's fine, we can be trend setters here and spread noble customs to everyone," I said. "The restaurant will have its own tableware just in case, but what if in your invitation you told the first people eating here to bring their own utensils and cups? If they're rich I'm sure they have tableware they're proud of, and some people might buy new ones just so they can brag. Do you have any tableware you could show off, Benno?"

Benno groaned a little. "...I do. I get the feeling that if I kick off a battle of people showing off their prized tableware it'll never end, but I do have some tableware I would want to bring if someone told me to bring my own."

"Okay. The restaurant won't need many utensils if you have people bring their own. And you won't have to worry about expensive tableware being stolen by customers." Benno had said that his greatest concern about decorating the restaurant like a noble's mansion was customers stealing or destroying things. I personally couldn't imagine stealing something from a restaurant, but apparently it wasn't uncommon.

"Oh yeah, speaking of which. You said you knew a way to cut down on theft and people leaving without paying their checks, yeah? What is it?"

I puffed out my chest with confidence and answered.

"Simple. Introductions only."

How to Run a Restaurant

When I explained the idea behind an “introductions-only” system, Benno shrugged his shoulders, unimpressed. Apparently it was more than commonplace to deny people entry into stores and restaurants without an introduction, or based on their clothes.

“Customers paying and acting well are too different things. Just ‘cause a customer pays well doesn’t mean they’re gonna be a good customer. In fact, a lot of them get smug and arrogant since they know they’re paying well. You think I want that?” Benno sighed and scratched his head, probably imagining a ton of annoying customers he’d had like that. I went ahead and explained the difference between my idea and the introductions generally given in this city.

“An introductions-only system doesn’t stop at the introduction. If a customer introduces someone who steals, doesn’t pay, or causes any other problems, then said customer will be responsible for paying and cleaning up the mess.”

“You want the customer to be responsible?!” Benno slammed a fist on the table and shot up, his eyes wide as he looked down at me in shock. He must not have expected my explanation at all.

“Yes. Customers will be much less likely to cause problems, since they’ll be involving those who introduced them in the mess. Those introducing others will be very careful about who they choose. Naturally, since problems resulting from their introduction will come back to them. They’ll only introduce people that can be trusted.”

“...But won’t that be expecting too much from customers?” Benno sat back down and rubbed his temples. My suggestion had been much more of a shock for him than I had anticipated. It was normal to require introductions, but clearly those who gave introductions were never held responsible for anything.

“Ultimately you’re prioritizing the atmosphere of the store and preventing problems, so the end result will be your regulars feeling like they matter while they enjoy pleasant, uninterrupted meals. But well, I’ll leave this decision up to you, Benno.”

My job was to give advice, Benno’s job was to make decisions based on that advice. He asked me a question about a problem and I gave him a potential solution. Nothing more, nothing less. My life as a merchant ended before I even became an apprentice. I had no idea if my ideas would hold water in this city.

“I will say, though, that I don’t think you’ll have any problems with implementing new systems as long as you’re consistent with them from the start. This is a restaurant where commoners will be able to eat food fit for nobles. It’s trailblazing, and everyone will know it. You’ll have problems if you try introducing something new after the restaurant’s already opened, though.”

Benno furrowed his eyebrows harder and glared at empty space. “I’m gonna need to iron out a lot of details if I do that.”

“Mmm... Can’t you just lay out a few rules that definitely should never be broken, then make tiny changes depending on how things play out? This is going to be a totally new system, so being loose and flexible should be more effective than trying to get it perfect right from the start. Probably.”

“Hmmm...” Benno fell into thought, so I looked back down at my diptych.

“Okay, that’s enough about the introductions-only system. Let’s think about what we need to get ready before the restaurant opens.”

“What’re you talking about? We just finished talking about that.” Benno gave me a puzzled look. I double checked my list of things I wasn’t sure about, then glared at Benno while pouting.

“What are *you* talking about? The only thing we finished talking about was the interior decoration. You’ll need menus and bells for each table, won’t you? Both need to be very high quality to match the restaurant’s atmosphere.”

“Menus? What for? The servers can tell them what we have.”

Restaurants in this world had the servers inform customers of the menu. That was fine for commoner eateries where the most complex thing to ask was whether you wanted your sausage cooked or boiled, and for noble homes since servers needed merely state what the chefs had already made. But in a restaurant like ours where different people would be picking different food from a long list of things they hadn’t heard of before, menus were necessary to keep everything in order. The server wouldn’t last without them.

“If you write all the food and spirits available in a restaurant on menus and put them at each table, customers will be able to know what you’re serving without asking the waiter about every little thing. They’ll be able to pick what they want at their own pace, too. I don’t know how many servers you intend to hire, but the less time they have to spend at each table the better.”

“What about people who don’t know how to read?” Benno’s grimace reminded me just how low the literacy rate was here, but it wouldn’t be a problem here.

“The restaurant’s first customers will be the owners of large stores, right? Lutz had to learn to read just to become an apprentice

merchant, so I can't imagine that large store owners will be illiterate."

Not to mention that said large store owners would be discussing business while eating, which meant they would have servants with pens and boards standing by. It should be safe to assume that someone involved in this equation would know how to read. They wouldn't be able to do their job if they couldn't read or write contracts.

"Oh, and about the menus. Do you want me to make somewhat thicker paper and put plants inside like I did before? I could make paper menus for the regular dishes and for the seasonal dishes. I think that would make good advertising for our plant paper." *I'd like for the menus to be pretty fashionable. Not cute, but pretty and fitting for a noble environment. I wonder what plant would be good for this season? Maybe I should go all the way and try making colored paper.*

"Paper, really? You think menus are that important?"

"Menus are essential for restaurants! Oh, should I go inform the Myne Workshop? My attendant has such lovely handwriting it's like art unto itself. Impressive, don't you think? Eheheh."

"...I don't get what you're talking about or why it's so important, but alright. I'll leave it to you." Benno cradled his head in exhaustion. With a new job secured, I grinned and began thinking of menu designs in my head.

"You can count on me! By the way, what are you going to do about waiters? Commoners you find on the street won't have the elegance that nobles demand from their servers."

There was a big difference between the waiters at commoner eateries and servers at noble mansions. I knew that especially well thanks to Fran and my other attendants serving me food. I wouldn't want Benno thinking Fran was on the same level as some lower city rando that didn't even care about spilling drinks or dropping a little food. And it seemed he did not, given that he looked at me with a somewhat pitiful expression.

"...Can't you handle that somehow?"

"You want me to train waiters in my chambers too? Mmm... The chefs are one thing, but I don't think I'll get permission to bring waiters into my room."

"What about letting priests work outside the temple?"

"I have lunch with the High Priest tomorrow, so I'll ask him then. Don't get your hopes up, though."

The High Priest had previously said that only those who had nobody to look after them or introduce them to work became priests and shrine maidens. At the time I interpreted that as "They can go outside if someone starts looking after them," but now that I knew more about the dark underside of the temple and the orphanage, I couldn't take his words at face value. He might allow them to work

outside since the temple had an overabundance of gray priests and needed money, or he might not for fear of it breaking down the temple's internal structure. We were in some awkward middle ground.

"By the way. I was thinking of inviting the High Priest to the first round of visitors. What do you think, Benno?"

"Hold up. The High Priest? You think a real noble would bother to come?" It seemed that a noble visiting a commoner's store was beyond ridiculous. If they wanted to see a merchant, they generally summoned them to their home in the Noble's Quarter. The temple was located in between the Noble's Quarter and the commoner part of the city, and thus had gates connecting the two. But blue priests never entered the lower city unless a ceremony required it.

"The High Priest seems to be interested in the food I've thought up. It depends on how I approach it, but I don't think he'll refuse if I ask," I said, while the fascinated Benno stroked his chin and fell into thought. "Which is why I think you should invite only people you can really trust to the first round of visitors. Don't you think they'll feel super special for getting to eat with a noble?"

"...They sure will."

"The Italian restaurant will develop an amazing reputation right off the bat if an actual noble has eaten there." My words made Benno's dark red eyes flash with the carnivorous light of a merchant who had found profit. "Don't treat it like the pound cake taste-testing event where we invited a bunch of people. Invite a small group of people, those you can trust. With the number of chefs we have now, you won't be able to make all that much food. The food is expensive enough that the potential customer base for it isn't too large. Why not make it an exclusive, high-class restaurant where only the chosen can enter? The chosen few with lots of cash to dump right into our hands?"

"That'll work if we can get the High Priest's help. Don't mess this up, Myne."

Benno gave me a firm handshake and we grinned at each other, at which point Rosina tilted her head elegantly.

"Excuse me, Sister Myne. What about music? When nobles eat, multiple musicians are summoned so that they might take turns playing while the meal proceeds. Will no music be played in the restaurant?"

Well... I hadn't thought about music at all. I looked back at Benno, only to see him raise his hands in surrender.

"Sorry, but I don't know any musicians good enough to play for nobles."

"...How would you feel about playing music in the restaurant, Rosina?"

“I am willing to do anything if it means spending more of my time playing music.” Rosina replied so quickly and confidently that I realized she had probably brought up music specifically because she wanted to be the one playing it.

“This will be a mostly lunchtime restaurant, right? If people ask for music when making reservations and pay a fee for the service, well... I can lend you Rosina.” I wouldn’t mind lending him Rosina if there were customers who wanted music enough to pay a fee for it. She could make it in time if she went to the restaurant after third bell rang and our practice ended. But she needed to learn to do paperwork too, and the High Priest would get involved if it came to her going outside every day.

“...Hey, what about nighttime?”

“Wha? That’s gonna be a hard no from me, obviously. Nighttime means alcohol and I’m not going to throw a cutie like Rosina into a den of drunk wolves. If you want music at night, find a musician of your own.” Waitresses working at nighttime bars here tended to be prostitutes on the side, and despite the nature of the Italian restaurant, there would probably be some customers who wouldn’t take no for an answer. I had no intention whatsoever of putting Rosina in an environment like that.

Sixth bell rang as we ironed out the details, signaling the end of the workday. Benno eyed me while writing a summary of what we had discussed.

“You better learn a lot from the High Priest tomorrow.”

“You can count on me!”

“...Ngh, why do I feel so nervous?” said Benno, holding his stomach in faux pain. I blew up my cheeks in a big pout.

“You know who’s nervous? Me, about whether this restaurant’s ever going to get finished. Slowpoke.”

The next day came, and it was the date of my lunch with the High Priest. The time until third bell was my last cramming opportunity, and I practiced my heart out as Rosina watched over me with steely determination. I could play the harspiel itself without much issue, but I always lost my place among the strings when I started to sing. I would be fine if I was just careful about that.

After practice, it was time to help the High Priest with his paperwork. Fran was busy preparing for the lunch and thus entrusted Gil with taking me there. Personally, I wasn’t extremely worried since the High Priest was reasonable and would be forgiving of some mistakes, but Fran and Rosina were both on edge. *They always end up on the same page when nobles are involved.*

After fourth bell, I returned to my room with Gil. Delia cleaned

me up a bit, then I left the room with Rosina carrying the large harspiel and Fran holding the utensils and the box containing the small harspiel. Rosina had been asked to play music during lunch, and in contrast to how my hands were already shaking with nervousness at the prospect of playing the song I had finished learning days ago, she looked calm and composed.

“...Aren’t you nervous, Rosina?”

“I am nervous. There is an unsettling feeling stirring in my chest.” She spoke with such a bright smile that I had a hard time believing her. But Rosina’s smile was a weapon she wielded, just like noble women. It was a tool to protect oneself and show no weakness to others.

“It’s next to impossible for me to tell, but I suppose you’re forcing that smile to hide your nervousness?”

“Yes. A smile tells others that you are in control of the situation.”

We arrived at the High Priest’s room just as a number of gray priests were moving furniture around in preparation for lunch. With their trained movements in the corner of my eyes, I greeted the High Priest just like a noble would. I said the exact words Fran had beaten into my head and curtsied the exact way Rosina had trained me to.

Fran and Rosina had thought up the greeting together. It began with the names of gods and used poetic metaphors to express how honored I was to receive his invitation, so it was pretty long. I had to say it while kneeling on one knee and crossing my arms in front of my chest. Behaving gracefully was pure suffering for someone lacking in muscles like me.

Lutz was told to memorize the greetings with me and even he couldn’t believe it. He actually started complaining, saying that a simple “thank you for the invitation” should suffice. He was memorizing the greetings with me since he would be dealing with nobles as a *leherl*, but the number of difficult expressions and hard-to-pronounce deity names were beating him down. I was used to polytheism myself as a Japanese person, but whenever noble greetings got involved I found myself wishing the religion here was monotheistic.

But still, our practice bore fruit. I managed to give a greeting twice as graceful as my normal greetings without ever stumbling or forgetting what to say. I stepped on my robe at the end and struggled to stand up, but I didn’t fall over. *I sure have grown.*

“Good enough. Not great, but not bad either. You two have trained her well. Now, let us see if her harspiel practice has gone just as well.” After the High Priest praised my attendants for their efforts, his lips curved into a slight grin at the sight of the harspiel in Fran’s hands.

I looked at Rosina with a smile. "If I have gotten better, it is thanks to my splendid teacher."

"Oh, perish the thought. You have a talent for music, Sister Myne. You learned the musical scale in the blink of an eye, and reading music comes more naturally to you than anyone I have seen. The movements of your fingers are still awkward, but practice will take care of that."

S-Stop! I don't have any talent! It's all leftovers from my past life's piano practice and music lessons! I wanted to grovel on the floor and swear that I didn't deserve her praise, but now wasn't the time for that. I tried smiling to hide my anxiety, as I had been taught moments prior, but I could feel my mouth twitching.

"Fascinating. You will show me the fruits of that practice while lunch is being prepared." At the High Priest's orders, a gray priest prepared a chair for me and helped me sit. Fran handed me my harpsiel, whispering encouragement as he did so.

All I needed to do was repeat what I had practiced. The song wasn't that hard, since it was the first one. I would be fine if I stayed calm.

After taking some deep breaths, I looked up and saw that Rosina was tensed up, as if nervous. She resembled a mother seeing her child play at their first school recital.

I strummed the harpsiel's strings. The short practice song I had learned was called "The Autumn Harvest." The lyrics simply consisted of listing food names then calling them tasty, and it wasn't too hard if I could just keep my fingers moving.

"Blessings of the forest, what an autumn harvest~"

After finishing the song without making any mistakes, I let out a sigh of relief.

"...Not bad at all."

"Indeed. Sister Myne is quite the fast learner. Actually, Sister Myne, why not use this opportunity to play the song you composed the other day?"

"Wha? The song I composed...?" *Mmm...? I don't remember anything like that.*

"I believe it went like this."

I wasn't sure if it was because I was a kid or because this body was just built for it, but these ears were better at picking up sound than my Urano ears had been. I didn't have perfect pitch or anything, but I was pretty good. It was easier to convert my thoughts into the musical scale than it had been in my Urano days. At one point I tried playing a random song I remembered, and apparently Rosina remembered that in full.

"I-I haven't thought of any lyrics for it yet. Maybe next time...?"

Naturally, translating the English lyrics to a movie theme song into this world's language was a bit too much to ask for me to do on the spot. But after I shook my head, the High Priest gave a slight smile with his eyes shining with curiosity.

“Yes, have it ready by next time. Here is the next song for you to learn.”

Noooo... I've made things harder on myself again. I wept on the inside while taking the new sheet music from him. Now I had to learn a new song and think up lyrics for my own song.

“Now then, let us eat.” Gleaming silver tableware was set on the table in front of the High Priest. Fran had lined up my own tableware in front of me. It was common practice for only servants to touch their master's tableware, for fear of it being stolen or destroyed.

The tableware I was using had been left by the prior orphanage director, which meant it was pretty good. Fran had suggested that I buy a new set, but I turned him down. A set that matched the room would be too expensive. I told him “I don't know what kind of person the former orphanage director was, but their sins are not the sins of their belongings” and took the tableware for myself.

As I had eaten the equivalent of what nobles ate at the guildmaster's house, the food was delivered in courses similar to what I expected. First drinks were poured, then appetizers, then soup, then the main dishes, then fruits and a dessert, and then the meal finished with tea.

However, the quantity and quality of the food was on another level. I knew it was because the leftovers were given to servants, but the appetizer course alone had eight plates with different kinds of food. An attendant would bring food to their master's plate bit by bit, and if I didn't hold back I would get beyond full just on the appetizers. Fran knew well how much I could eat and selected portions from the three kinds of foods I would be most likely to enjoy. I chomped down on them while thinking about how Benno and I could improve our own food.

...Our food tasted just as good, but it seemed we needed to work on our presentation—how we cut the food, put it on the plates, and so on. Noble cooking had some pretty high-level presentation. But soup was just as bland here as it was at the guildmaster's. If there was one battle my food won, it was with the soup. The main dishes came in several plates. There was a lot of meat, but I couldn't see any fish. It seemed that even nobles didn't eat fish much at all.

As we ate we talked about my harspiel practice, questions I had about the paperwork, the state of the orphanage, and the status of the Myne Workshop. The High Priest mainly just gave non-committal comments to things I said. He sometimes said things laden with

euphemisms, but I could never figure out what he was actually trying to say. The conversation was basically a loop of me tilting my head until the High Priest sighed in defeat and gave up.

...Looks like Fran and the other gray priests would be solid waiters. Maybe I should work harder to get music for the restaurant. I couldn't help but think that way while listening to Rosina play the harspiel as we ate. Back in my Urano days, every store I ever walked into would have music playing in the background, but listening to music wasn't so easy in this world. At this point, I ended up sentimental every time I got the opportunity to hear music at all.

"...You seem to have fallen into thought. Was this lunch a good reference for you?" asked the High Priest while sipping his after-meal tea.

"Yes, very. And by the way, before I go... could I talk to you about something?"

"Wait. Discussions with you are best left elsewhere." The High Priest interrupted me, so I slowly finished the rest of my strong-smelling tea. He opened the secret room and I followed him inside. By now I was used to clearing space on the bench to sit while the High Priest brought his chair.

"Now. What is it this time?"

The Significance of Going Outside

“There are more gray priests than there is work right now, and I might have a solution to that... Would you let gray priests work as waiters in a restaurant built for serving noble-inspired food to rich commoners?” I asked.

My question didn't seem to surprise the High Priest; he must have remembered what we talked about in my chambers. “I imagine you would want gray priests who have worked as attendants to be your waiters.”

“Gray priests with attendant experience would be best since they're especially good-mannered, polite, and hard-working, but even Gil does a decent job serving food. I think any gray priest here could be a great waiter after just a little training.”

Having one gray priest with attendant experience would be a big help, but they didn't all have to have experience. Those raised in the orphanage were almost always polite and obedient, probably due to following the example set by attendants and blue priests, being taught that violence was wrong, and living a life of locked-up servitude from birth. It wouldn't be too hard to train them into waiters if at least one of them had experience to draw from.

“...If training them into waiters would take so little time, why not train commoners from the lower city?”

“Whether or not someone has lived a life close to nobles makes a big difference here.”

Benno wouldn't be worried about training waiters if it was that easy. Most servers in lower city eateries were prostitute waitresses. And although apprentice chefs worked as waiters when things got busy, serving was understood to be a low-difficulty job that didn't demand much. If Benno began hiring servers, almost all of his applicants would be poor women stricken with poverty, no doubt about it. That would hurt the restaurant's classy atmosphere. Just like Lutz had busted his back to develop better manners, each waitress would have to be educated from the ground up to completely change their behavior and manner of speaking.

“Benno owns a fairly high-class store, does he not? I would think his workers there would suffice.”

Out of Benno's servants, the High Priest was familiar primarily with Mark. But Mark was on a higher level than most others in the

Gilberta Company. And although the other employees were polite and well-mannered thanks to Mark's training, using them wasn't an option here. The lehangs working at Benno's store were mostly the children of merchants who wanted to form connections with the Gilberta Company. Their job description involved clothing and paperwork, not serving food. They would fight back hard if we tried making them work as waiters.

"It is a matter of course that gray priests with attendant experience would be excellent servers, but would they be allowed to work with no supervision? Who would you propose to be their guardian? In addition, only a select few earning income outside the temple would lead to financial inequality even within the orphanage. Your thoughts on that?"

Benno could serve as the guardian for at least one of them, but I didn't know about all of them at once. I also hadn't thought at all about the financial inequality that would occur in the orphanage. "...I can't answer those questions right away."

"I would imagine so. These are not simple problems," said the High Priest with a tone that made it clear this was something he had thought about long ago. The problems weren't simple, but I knew he would never give his permission if I didn't provide answers to them.

"I did not expect to get your permission immediately. I just wanted to hear your thoughts. And on that note, might I ask what you think about gray priests working outside the temple?"

The High Priest lowered his gaze in thought while tapping a finger against his forehead. "Hm. Well, I believe it will be difficult for them. As anyone could tell from looking at you, the culture of the outside world differs greatly from the temple. Do you think that gray priests could adjust so quickly to the lower city after living their entire lives here?"

Thinking back to the first time I took Fran and Gil outside of the temple, I slowly shook my head. "I think they would manage inside the restaurant, but outside of that..." When it came to serving wealthy customers in a restaurant designed to look like a noble mansion, the gray priests would need only act like they normally did. Even when it came to dealing with money, their experience with the Myne Workshop would probably help them handle the transactions just fine. But the second they stepped outside the restaurant, their life experience in the temple would start working against them in a big way.

"Furthermore, what will you do if the gray priests begin to wish for a life on the outside after they grow accustomed to it? Will you be able to provide that lifestyle for them?"

"That would be difficult, I think. I'm too young to be their

guardian, and even if I asked Benno, he'd only be able to give them what he would give to a live-in apprentice. Living alone would be unbearably harsh for someone who has grown up with everything being given to them in the form of divine gifts."

There wasn't really a major food problem in the orphanage at the moment. Everyone did their chores and had enough food waiting for them at the end of the day. But outside of the temple they would need to make their own meals or eat out, and I doubted the priests used to eating food cooked for nobles would feel satisfied with the meals of the lower city. Not to mention that I was a little scared of sending the priests out on their own when they still struggled to understand the concept of money and how to use it. I could imagine it wouldn't take long for some crook to scam them out of everything they had.

"Lastly—and this is the most important factor for me—what will the populace think of orphans being hired? Do you think they will be embraced, or rejected?"

"...More so the latter." Judging by how my parents reacted to me joining the temple, it was hard to imagine people having a good impression of orphans or the temple. Their skill as waiters would no doubt be appreciated, but the prejudice they would face would probably be rough.

"Moreover, is it not possible that the difference in status between those working outside and the other gray priests will lead to some finding it uncomfortable to stay in the orphanage? I believe the friction that boy had with his family began after he changed his place of work, no?"

Different work meant different pay. The temple maintained equality between the grays, and bringing inequality to the orphanage would cause their way of life to break down. Things might get even worse than they did with Lutz's family. And as the orphanage director, I would need to settle that chaos.

...*That sounds scary.* It was impossible to predict the chaos resulting from a sudden change. Being told that I would be responsible for something I couldn't predict was honestly terrifying. The High Priest's sharp gaze softened, as if he had seen through me and knew how scared I was.

"I believe there is no issue with them working in the Myne Workshop. As you said, they are earning profit and the conditions of the orphanage have vastly improved. I have heard that the children are much more lively than before thanks to their trips to the forest and the visits from merchants such as Benno. But there is a significant difference between them doing work inside the temple on the temple's rules while making contact with the outside world, and working in the outside world under the outside's rules."

I nodded, and the High Priest's expression showed that he was a bit relieved that I understood.

"Not to mention, even if Benno could be their guardian, I do not yet know Benno very well. I cannot make an informed decision as to whether he is more trustworthy than a laynoble purchasing gray priests as servants. I also do not know if a restaurant would be a suitable place for priests to work."

"If you came to the restaurant during its initial test run, you could see with your own eyes just what kind of place it is," I suggested to the High Priest with a smile. He shook his head with an exasperated look.

"I do not know what you are planning, but it is written on your face that you have ill intentions. Learn to hide your emotions better. But in any case, I am allowing merchants to enter the temple on their way to the Myne Workshop and I can permit you to expand the jobs done by gray priests, but as it stands I will not allow them to work outside."

I had expected his rejection, so I didn't feel too disappointed. Instead, I knew I just had to keep changing things here bit by bit until the High Priest changed his mind. "...Understood. I will work hard to ensure that you come to know Benno well by the time the restaurant is finished. And by I, I mean Benno."

"You won't work hard on that yourself?"

"Maybe a little, but there's a mountain of things that need my attention more, so..."

The High Priest gave a short laugh. "Learning to behave as a noble certainly does come first," he said.

Sorry, but I'm prioritizing the picture books for my soon-to-be-born little sibling.

"...And that's why he won't let priests work outside the temple."

The day after my lunch with the High Priest, I gave a report to Benno in his store like I always did. I told him what I noticed during my meal with a noble, then explained why he wouldn't let the priests work outside.

"Figures," Benno murmured, apparently having expected as much. "But hey, since we can go into the workshop, how about you include training waiters in their workshop duties?"

"Mmm, that might be a good thing to do during the winter when we can't make paper. Though that would get in the way of them doing winter handiwork." Winter was a season that demanded a significant amount of firewood and food. Since we couldn't gather much in the forest, we would need to buy most of it. Winter handiwork was valuable since you could both kill time and make money while

blocked in by the snow.

“What kinda handiwork?”

“I was planning to make a variety of toys. I would like to order a lot of boards from a carpentry workshop, but all the ones you know are busy with orders for the restaurant, right? Could you introduce me to another workshop?”

I didn't want to delay the restaurant's opening even further. It might have been normal in this world, but to me it just felt like walking into failure. Benno grimaced when I suggested he introduce me to another workshop, but I didn't want my own order to be put off for months. I wanted to give my order to a workshop that would get it done for sure.

“I need it to be delivered before winter starts. If it's that hard for you to introduce me to a workshop from your network of associates, I can just find someone else to do it.”

“That ‘someone else’ would be Freida, yeah? Not a chance.” I thought for sure Freida would know workshops Benno didn't, but he rejected my idea before I even said her name. “...Fine, alright. I'll talk to the foreman of the workshop I go to about introducing you to someone.”

“In that case, let's go to an ink workshop first. I want ink. Or rather, the boards will be useless without ink.” I emphasized my need for ink until Benno scratched his head and stood up, looking annoyed. He then picked me up and strode out of his office.

“Mark, I'm gonna go to the ink and carpentry workshops with Myne. Lutz, come with us.”

“Understood, Master Benno.”

When we arrived at the ink store, me traveling in Benno's arms, I checked the prices of the ink bottles lined up on a shelf and felt my head spin from how expensive they were.

“Do you have any other ink?”

“This is all we sell here. If you really want to know about ink, try going to the workshop directly.” As I hung my head in disappointment, Benno asked for the location of the ink workshop and off we went to craftsman's alley. The sharp scent of various chemicals pierced my nose when we arrived. Benno set me down and I walked into the workshop myself.

“...Not often that customers come here themselves. What's your business?” Only rich people who could read and write needed ink, so they always ordered what they wanted at stores without bothering to deal with the workshop. None of them wanted to visit a store with such an overwhelming smell. The foreman, whose face and clothes were dotted with black ink stains, narrowed his eyes and looked us over suspiciously. He seemed a bit high strung, maybe because his job

involved precise extraction of pigments and careful mixing.

“Um, I would like to know what kinds of ink you make here.”

The foreman’s furrowed brow managed to furrow further as he looked down at me.

“How do you make your ink?” I asked.

“Sorry, but that’s a trade secret,” he snorted, clearly having no intention of answering. I hurriedly continued, since it looked like he was on the verge of ending the conversation.

“I don’t want to know the method, I just want to know what kind of ink it is. Is it (iron gall) ink, is it sticky (lampblack) ink...? That’s all I want to know.”

“...Huh? What’re you talking about?” The foreman didn’t understand me at all since I didn’t know the names of this world’s ink varieties. I desperately tried to think of ways to describe the kinds of ink I knew.

“Umm, how many different kinds of ink do you make here?”

“Ink is ink. That’s all there is.” The foreman shook his head as if I had asked the dumbest question in the world.

“Okay, I’ll describe different ways to make ink and you can tell me which sounds familiar to you.”

He closed his eyes with annoyance to think about it, then nodded. I figured they were probably making iron gall ink, so I described how to make that as simply as I could.

“Harvest natural dyes from plant gall, ferment it, mix in (ferric ions)... I mean, iron salts, then take plant fibe—”

“That’s it! How do you know that?!” The foreman gasped and dropped his annoyed expression to lean forward towards me. His sudden intensity made me hide behind Benno.

“I don’t know what to tell you except that I learned about it because I was interested. You don’t make any other kinds of ink, do you?”

“...There are other kinds of ink?” Judging by the piercing look in his eyes, it was likely that he really did only know about iron gall ink. I slumped my shoulders and shook my head, unable to hide my disappointment.

“Nevermind, it’s fine. It would be better to buy ink at a store than order it here, right?”

The foreman crossed his arms, thought about something, then nodded. “Yeah. If you’re just buying, the store’s the better place to go. And... girl, what’s your name?”

“I’m Benno of the Gilberta Company, her guardian. Bring any questions to me. Later.” Benno put a hand on my mouth to stop me from answering, then lifted me up and turned around.

I could see the foreman looking straight at us as Benno walked

away. "...The Gilberta Company, huh? Alright."

The second we were out of the workshop, Benno flipped his lid. "What were you thinking in there?!"

"Bwuh? I was just seeing what kind of ink they made."

"Couldn't you be a little more subtle...? Actually, probably not, I guess."

I had thought I was just having a peaceful discussion with the ink workshop, but to Benno it apparently looked like I was picking a fight or something. But what else could I have done? I didn't know what kind of ink they made. It was hard to think they would understand me if I said India ink or printing ink or anything like that.

"I guessed it the second he said they only make one kind of ink, but it looks like they're making (iron gall) ink. That's a shame."

Iron gall ink was the kind of ink commonly used in Rome, medieval Europe, and so on prior to the invention of modern ink. It was widely used thanks to its durability, water resistance, and simple manufacturing process. One important factor was that, unlike India ink, it stuck to parchment and wouldn't vanish if you rubbed it or washed it. But since it included acidic components, the dried ink would start eating the writing surface away. Plant paper decomposed faster than parchment, and sometimes the paper would end up covered in holes by the end of the decade.

That would be a problem for a picture book I intended to make for a child who wasn't even born yet. Fire-resistant trombe paper would probably resist the corrosion, but that would run such an enormous cost that it wasn't really worth considering.

"Maybe I should just make the ink myself?" Iron gall ink might work if I used something to neutralize the acidity, but that would be picking a fight with the vested interests again. It would be better for me to just develop a different kind of ink entirely.

"Huh? You're gonna pick a fight with the Ink Guild head-on?"

"Why do you look so excited, Benno? I'm not trying to start any fights. I would have let things end here if I could just buy the kind of ink I want, and now I'm feeling annoyed that I have to make it myself. I don't like conflict."

Benno gave a bored snort at my protests and started walking. I started to think out loud while bouncing in his arms. "(India) ink might be good for plant paper. But I would want something more sticky for woodcuts. Oh, wait a second. I think I saw ancient (Chinese) woodcuts in a (museum) once, so maybe (India) ink will work? Or should I just go all the way and make (oil paint)? (Crayons) smear when you rub them, so I don't think they would be too good for woodcuts or picture books."

I had made iron gall ink, oil paint, and crayons with my mom

back in my Urano days, but all of them used ingredients we just bought in a store. It would be a lot harder to get the equipment and materials we needed here. ...*I'm pretty sure we hardened the crayons in lipstick cases. I would want an airtight container for the paint, but what could I use for that?*

"Uh. Lutz. What the hell is Myne saying?"

"She's just saying what she's thinking. You can just ignore her. She'll be stuck like this until she settles on an answer."

No matter what method I chose, getting the pigments would be difficult. I would probably have to gather soot again, just like I had to do for the soot pens. But unlike before, I could buy animal hide glue and wax. It was much easier to get materials now than when I didn't even have the money to buy a single nail. Making ink now would be much, much easier than it would have been back then.

"Hey, Lutz. I'm guessing you won't really understand what I need for this unless we go ahead and start making prototypes like we did with the paper, right?" I leaned over Benno's shoulder to talk to Lutz, and he shrugged.

"...Made your decision, then? What kind of ink are you gonna make?"

"Every kind that might be good with woodcuts. I'll make my picture books with whatever ink works the best." My reply made Lutz shake his head with exasperation.

"You still haven't given up on picture books?"

"They'll be my first gift to the baby as his older sister. How could I give up on them?"

"Figures. Things were finally calming down at the Myne Workshop, but I guess it's back to being busy." Lutz looked exasperated, but at the same time was grinning with eager excitement.

Preparing to Make Ink

Despite having decided to make ink, I couldn't just start right away. I first needed to go to Sieg's carpentry workshop and have the foreman introduce me to another workshop.

When we arrived, the same supervisor as before was at the counter doing some work. He looked up, blinked in surprise, then gave a friendly smile. "Heya, Benno and Sieg's little brother."

"Call the foreman for me," replied Benno, and the supervisor immediately turned around to go deeper into the workshop. We faintly heard him yell "Foreman!" behind the door, then a bearded man with two thick arms came out front while brushing wood shavings off his clothes.

"What brings you here, Benno? Not quite done with your wainscot yet."

"Yeah, I'm here 'cause I want an introduction to another carpentry workshop."

"...What's that supposed to mean?" The foreman's eyes hardened on the spot. Benno gave a casual shrug while eyeing him back.

"I'm not thinking about breaking our contract. This girl here wants to place an order, but your place is filled up, yeah? Got any other carpentry workshops you wanna send work to?" asked Benno while pushing me forward.

The foreman relaxed a bit in relief, then looked me over while stroking his bushy beard. "Hmph. Guess I can send you to Ingo's place. Follow me."

The foreman took us to a workshop owned by someone named Ingo. He was a young foreman who had just recently gone independent. I called him young despite the fact he looked a bit older than Benno because most foremen were in their forties or older. The older foreman came with us because it was apparently normal to introduce new customers personally. I could guess that this was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to the power balance between workshops.

"My place doesn't have the manpower to take another job right now. Whaddaya think, Ingo?"

"Oh yeah, you got that big job recently. You giving me a bite of the pie here?"

"Course not, this is another job entirely. Your customer is this

little girl here. Have fun.” The foreman from Sieg’s place left it at that. Ingo looked down at me with clear disappointment. That was kinda annoying, but I couldn’t blame him—I did look like a kid who hadn’t even been baptized yet, after all.

“I would like wooden boards for winter handiwork. Please be sure to deliver them on time.” After giving a description of how big I wanted the boards to be, I completed my order.

This year, the orphanage’s winter handiwork would be making reversi sets and playing cards. For the reversi boards they would only need to draw a grid with ink on top of a thick board, and even the disks could be made by chopping up tiny pieces of a board and putting ink on one side. The good part about reversi was that anything that fit into the squares would work; they didn’t have to be circular.

As an aside, the same boards could be reused for chess if we made the pieces. But chess pieces were just too intricate and complex. It would be unreasonable to expect those in the orphanage to go from zero carpentry knowledge to carving chess pieces overnight. In the meantime we could use shogi pieces instead. They were simple since you just had to write the names of the pieces on top of tiny pentagons.

...But shogi and chess are different? That’s fine, nobody here knows that. I can even change the names and moves of the pieces however I want. Yup, it’s my rules now.

I thought about making the playing cards out of paper, but boards were cheaper than paper, and the washi made by the Myne Workshop would need to be modified to work as cards. Meanwhile, thin boards could endure being treated roughly by kids and all that without breaking too easily. Most of the cards would be fine with just some coloring and number marks, but I should probably think about how to deal with the jacks, queens, and kings. Drawing art for each deck of cards would just be too much.

“Still, what’re you gonna use all these boards for? Sure are ordering a lot of ’em,” inquired Ingo as I tapped my guild card against his to make an advance payment. The fact that I had a forewoman’s guild card and paid ahead of time without any fuss seemed to have earned his trust. He was a bit more relaxed than before.

“They’re for winter handiwork, but the details are a secret. I’ll order them again next year if they sell well.”

“...Next year too? Aren’t you signed up with him?” Ingo pointed at the door the other foreman had left from.

“That’s Benno’s workshop, but I haven’t decided on one yet. I’ll make my decision based on the quality and speed of your work. Please deliver the finished goods to the Gilberta Company.”

“Alright. Pleasure doing business with ya.”

With the boards ordered, I left the workshop in Benno’s arms and

returned to the store. Once there, he set me down by his desk with him and Lutz sitting on the other side. I could imagine that Benno was about to barrage me with questions about my future plans. And as expected, he drummed his fingers against the desk and glared at me while saying “Alright, spit it out,” the very image of a detective in a crime drama.

“Spit out what? I haven’t done anything wrong. These are false charges. I’m innocent.”

“Don’t play dumb, idiot. I’m talking about what you’re *about* to do. What’re those boards for? What is the ink for? What are you making? What do you need? Spit it all out.”

Lutz leaned in from the side to block Benno’s fervor a bit. His eyebrows lowered with concern and he tossed his opinion in. “Whatever it is, it’s gotta balance with the Myne Workshop’s paper-making. We don’t wanna go under projections here. Is the stuff you’re making gonna need anything from the forest?”

“Ummm... One second. I need to organize my thoughts.” I took out my diptych and started writing down what I needed. To make toys, I needed boards and ink. To make ink, I needed... to think for a minute. When I finally looked up, I saw that Benno and Lutz had boards and ink at the ready to write down what I said.

“I’m planning to make (reversi), (shogi pieces), and (playing cards). All of them will need boards and ink.” My list of things made Benno shake his head with a doubtful look in his eyes.

“What in the world is any of that?”

“They’re toys like the karuta. Oh, but they’re not designed around teaching kids to read, so even adults can play with them. I think they’ll be perfect for killing time in the winter.” They would be a good form of entertainment to pass the time with when locked in by blizzards. Just doing winter handiwork all winter would get boring. Poor people needed to do winter handiwork for the extra money, but what did rich people do over the winter?

“Ink is necessary for each of them, so I would like to get ink made as soon as possible.”

“You said something about making a different kind of ink than the ink workshop makes, yeah?”

“Yes. Since it will be made in an entirely different way from the workshop ink, we won’t need to get permission from anyone to make it, right? Nobody will come complaining?” If we made the same ink that had its manufacturing process kept secret by the Ink Guild, it was possible that we would break some contract magic or violate some obscure rule.

“Yeah, we won’t need anyone’s permission if it’s something new. They might come complaining, but we can brush’m off. But since you

spilled the beans to the ink workshop's foreman, they're probably gonna be sending people over here to probe what we have."

"What? I didn't leak anything. I said the bare minimum necessary to learn what I wanted to know." *We sure do interpret some things differently*, I thought as Benno's eyebrows shot up with anger.

"If telling them you know their trade secrets, know different kinds of ink, and know how to make those different kinds of ink isn't spilling the beans, what is?!"

"Bwuh? But I only said that to figure out what kind of ink they're making. It was necessary to prepare myself emotionally for making a new kind of ink. Plus, my plan right now is to sell the manufacturing process to the Ink Guild once I have a prototype ready, so they can mass produce it. Them learning about it sooner isn't a big deal."

The second I said that, Benno shut his eyes tightly and rubbed his temples. He shook his head several times in disbelief, then glared at me. "Hold up. You're going to sell the manufacturing process to the Ink Guild?"

"That's right. I mean, just think about how dangerous it got when you were fighting with the vested interests to make your Plant Paper Guild. Otto's still scrambling to help you keep it going on top of his soldier work, isn't he? You've spread your wings too far and don't have enough employees to keep up; making another new guild for ink would just be too much. If other people will make the ink for us, I say we let them."

He had made the Plant Paper Guild without my knowing and was somehow managing to keep it going by enlisting the help of others, so okay. I was fine with that. But I heard from Lutz that Benno was running his relatives in circles getting Plant Paper Guilds and paper-making workshops established in other cities. Even the Italian restaurant, which he had made to compete with Leise, was giving him a lot of trouble—according to Mark, he was suffering for going out of his area of expertise. I didn't think making yet another new guild would be anything but reckless.

"...You really make my head hurt sometimes. Why can't you respect profit a little more?"

"Well, I'm not a merchant. If they don't mind the Myne Workshop making some itself, I think only good will come from spreading how to make new ink and lowering its price worldwide."

Lutz, looking exasperated at my conversation with Benno, took out his diptych and tried getting us back on track. "Myne, Master Benno, why don't we worry about how to sell the ink once it's finished? What do we need to make that ink?"

"Oh, good point. Ummm... I thought of four things that could work as ink here: (India) ink, (oil paint), (Gutenberg ink), and

(crayon). But we can forget about (crayon), since out of all those it's the least suitable for being woodcut ink."

"Yeah, your explanations never make sense, Myne. What do we need to make those things?"

I looked down at my diptych. "We need something called a pigment to color the ink, and the easiest pigment for making black is soot. Any kind of ink will turn black if made from soot, so getting soot comes first." India ink, as traditionally made in China, could be made from mixing soot, animal hide glue, and spices. Oil paint could be made from mixing soot and drying oil. The extremely sticky kind of ink historically used after the advent of printing, which I was calling "Gutenberg ink" for convenience, could be made by mixing soot into boiled linseed oil.

"The (India) ink I know is made from coleseed oil and sesame oil mixed with lamp soot and burnt pine soot, but I guess we shouldn't be picky when making prototypes. We should be fine just cleaning our hearths and getting the soot from them... whiiich is something we did last year." I remembered Mom making me wear a bunch of rags and clean the hearth last year when I wanted to make soot pencils. I was pretty sure Lutz had ultimately cleaned his own hearth to get more soot too.

"Oh yeah, I remember that. Sounds good to me, our moms sure loved us helping."

"I'll go ahead and drop my soot on you too. Be grateful, you don't even have to work for it." Benno grinned as if he was plotting something. I didn't know what his plan was, but chimneys and hearths needed to be cleaned before winter anyway. I had no reason to reject free soot.

"What're you gonna do with the soot? Do you need anything else?" Lutz said, and I saw him write "gather soot" on his own diptych. I looked at my diptych to double check that India ink needed soot and hide glue.

"Next is (hide glue), I think? The really sticky paste that you can harvest from the skin and bone marrow of cows, pigs, and so on is important for making (India) ink. I'll also want it to harden the cover of my books once they're ready."

"The skin and bones of animals, huh? Shouldn't be too hard to get if we buy some meat for winter prep and butcher it all in the orphanage."

I faltered, thinking back to the pig that got stabbed and strung up in the farming village. I had naturally gotten used to that kind of thing by now, and I wouldn't pass out or scream at the sight of meat being butchered, but it was hard for me to participate when I didn't have the strength to cut meat like that.

“Butchering meat in the orphanage? Do they normally do that?” asked Benno, and the answer was clear as day. No way did the orphan kids have experience butchering meat when all their food was given to them and they hadn’t even seen a raw potato before.

“Definitely not.”

“In that case, how about I order some extra meat for the orphanage when I do my own winter prep?”

“That would be a big help! Thank you.” I hadn’t participated in the neighborhood butchering due to being sick so often, which meant I didn’t know any butchers and I couldn’t use a smoke room for myself. I appreciated Benno’s help so much that I clasped my hands and thanked him.

“You can make that, uh, stuff if you have skin and bones?”

“I do know how to make (hide glue), roughly, but I don’t have any experience actually making it. But since it’s so useful for so many things, I want to succeed in making it no matter what I have to do.”

Hide glue was made by soaking animal skin and bones in limewater to break them down and remove impurities such as hair, then boiling them in water, then drying the concentrated “glue liquor.” Glue made from skin had more water resistance than glue made from bones. I would prefer glue made from skin, but my priority was just getting any glue at all made and finished.

This variety of hide glue was mainly composed of collagen, a protein, so our amateur India ink would rot if left on its own for too long. It would rot faster during the summer heat and humidity, but on the other hand it would harden too quickly in the cold. Overall, the hide glue was surprisingly hard to deal with.

“So, we need (lime) to make (hide glue). That’s the white stuff you use when building the walls of ho—”

“Oh, lime.” Lutz’s reply taught me the word for lime here. Since lime was used for mortar, Deid—who worked in construction—probably knew where to buy it.

“That’s it, Lutz. Could you ask your dad where to buy it?”

“Sure. Just gotta write lime down. Do we just need to buy a little of it, like we only used a little bit of the ashes for the paper?” Unlike back when we first made paper, Lutz knew how to read and write, his parents had more or less accepted his dream to be a merchant, and he had the funds to buy what he needed. It almost seemed crazy that only a year ago we had no money and relied on our parents’ approval to get anything. So much had changed so fast.

As I wallowed in nostalgia, Lutz finished writing some stuff down and looked back up at me. “Need anything else?”

“Mmm, (India) ink only needs soot and that (hide glue). I’ll need (linseed oil) to make (oil paint), but I think Benno probably knows

where to buy that already.” I turned to look at Benno, and so did Lutz.

Benno scratched the back of his head and thought for a bit, but ultimately shook his head. “...Never heard that name before. What is it?”

“Your store deals with linen and flax thread, doesn’t it? Surely you know where to buy the (linseed oil) made from squeezing flax seeds.”

“Oh, linseed oil. Now that’s something I know... but oil doesn’t come cheap,” said Benno, to which I gave an empty smile. Regardless of how expensive it was, we had no choice but to buy it.

“We’re not going to start cultivating flax just to get the oil, and even if we buy the seeds, we don’t have any compressors. I think it would be cheaper just to buy the oil than to go out of our way buying devices to squeeze it out ourselves. You can compare the prices of the seeds and a compressor with the price of the oil to figure out what we should do next year.”

We could also use other kinds of drying oil, but I imagined the linseed oil used in the making of cloth would be easier to get than sunflower oil or safflower oil. I had never seen any safflowers or sunflowers around here.

“I can make the most simple kind of ink there is with these ingredients. All that’s left is the equipment. The best way to get the ink is to put the ingredients on top of a hard slab of rock and grind them together. Kind of like a mortar and pestle, but bigger.”

“Need any weird tools like you did for paper?” asked Benno, and I shook my head.

“No, we don’t actually need many tools. The slab, the pestle, an airtight container for storage, and a scraper. You can probably get most of these by asking a painting workshop. My mom works at a dyeing workshop, I could ask her.”

“...Alright. Everyone get your part of the stuff ready and take it to the Myne Workshop.” Benno ended the discussion there and we said our goodbyes.

Getting soot was easy since Mom and Karla were glad to get our help, but by this point it didn’t even need to be said that I caught a fever after working too hard. While I was bedridden at home, Lutz cleaned the Myne Workshop and Benno’s place for more soot.

“Master Benno was right, we got twice as much soot just like that. Heck yeah.” Lutz brought me up to date when he came to visit me. Apparently Corinna got really excited when she heard Lutz was cleaning Benno’s hearth for soot, and ended up using Otto to get soot from her place as well.

“Otto really is a slave to love. I don’t think he’ll ever be able to say no to Corinna.”

“Oh, and the gray priests worked super hard for us.” When the gray priests heard from Lutz that we were gathering soot, they went right to work cleaning fireplaces in the blue priests’ rooms, the hearths in their kitchens, and the chimneys to get soot for us. They didn’t mind, since it was about time to do winter cleaning anyway. And according to Lutz, Gil cleaned the hearth and fireplace in my chambers.

“Thanks to all that, the Myne Workshop’s got plenty of soot now. Plus, Master Benno bought the linseed oil and I got Dad to buy some lime for us. We asked a painting workshop about the tools, and they should be getting here soon. Right now we’re crushing the soot into fine powder.”

It seemed that the tools and materials were being gathered at the Myne Workshop while I was stuck in bed. ...*It sure is nice to have a lot of people working for you.*

“Okay, winter preparations haven’t started just yet, so let’s try making the kinds of ink that need oil and put off the hide glue until later. Once that’s done we can make woodcuts and try printing. Oh! Oh, right. We need to order boards for the woodcuts too. But since it’ll be prototype ink, maybe I should make stamps first instead? What do you think, Lutz?”

“Don’t get too excited. You can’t do anything until your fever’s down, remember?”

“Ngh...” *I’ll... I’ll start with the oil paint once my fever’s down. Right.*

Black Oil Paint

“Dad, pleaaaase? I want to use it to check the ink.”

My fever refused to go down, and after Dad brought me a glass of water I sat up and clasped my hands together to start begging. I wrote mirrored letters on a block of wood large enough to grip and asked him to carve the letters out to turn it into a stamp.

“...Sheesh. When I’m done, I’m not gonna show it to you until your fever’s down.”

Two days passed since I asked Dad to see the carved-out block. My fever finally went down and the debate of the century began, with my family arguing that I needed to stay home for a bit before going to the workshop and Lutz arguing that making ink would get me so excited I would get a fever the next time I went to the workshop no matter what.

“Um, I think th—”

“Be quiet, Myne! We know you want to go already!”

Everyone agreed with Tuuli, and I was denied participation in a debate that was about me. Bored, I fished through the storage room and took out a thin wooden board. I stayed in the corner of the kitchen while everyone was arguing and wrapped a cloth around it, then wrapped a layer of bamboo around it so it wouldn’t hurt the paper.

...Eheh, I made a baren. Kinda. This will definitely be important for the woodcuts. The debate ended by the time I finished my baren, with the ultimate decision being that I would stay at home today, but could go to the temple again starting the next day.

A day of waiting built up my hype. With some old clothes I wouldn’t mind throwing out, soap, and the stamp Dad made for me, I was ready to go.

“Are you as excited as I am, Lutz?”

“Yeah. So, how do you make this stuff anyway? You’re gonna have to explain, since you don’t get to help.” He was kinda hiding it, but Lutz did look excited to be making something new again. I couldn’t participate in the making myself since I was forbidden from working in the workshop as a blue shrine maiden, which meant I had to tell Lutz exactly what to do.

“When adding the paint, add small amounts bit by bit. Things will mix together better that way. But to start with, you have to put the soot on top of the marble slab. Then you dig in little holes with your fingers, pour the linseed oil into the holes, and mix it up with the scraper. We don’t want too much oil, so if you think you need more, add only one drop at a time. Once you’ve mixed it up with the scraper, go to town with the pestle.” I explained what to do while using my hands to show how much soot and oil to add.

Lutz fell silent, thinking for a few moments. “...How hard do you mean when you say ‘go to town?’” he asked.

“I’m not sure, it depends on the pigment. When I made this in the past it took about twenty minut— Uuum, about as long as it takes for a pot of water to get boiling, but someone using another pigment might not finish by the time the water’s boiling.”

You had to keep mashing it all until it got silky. The mashing was exhausting and took a lot of grit and endurance. When I explained in cooking terms, Lutz opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“...You managed to make something like that? You, Myne?”

“Back then I was a peppy girl, okay? Everyone always said I was full of energy as long as I got to read books. I even got (perfect attendance) at my (school’s) library.”

“Life sure comes at you fast.”

I gave a big nod. It was hard not to complain that if not for this body, things would have been a lot easier for me. There would be so much more that I could do.

“Alright, I’m going off to the workshop. Come on over whenever you’re ready.” Once we reached the gate, Lutz handed me off to Fran and speed-walked to the workshop. I was going to my chambers to greet my servants before going to the workshop, since I had been bedridden for so long.

“And now that I am better, I believe I shall go to the workshop.”

“Your harspiel practice comes first, Sister Myne.”

I wanted to get started making ink right away, but Rosina stopped me with a smile. An ambush had been set in the place I least expected.

“Daily practice is vital for learning an instrument, but you have already missed practice five days in a row. You will need to practice more than twice as long today to minimize the damage. I believe five times as long will suffice, given that you missed five days.”

Rosina’s blue eyes were sparkling in excitement at the prospect of practicing five times as long. She was serious, too. She seriously intended to make me practice five times as long. Just as I could read books all day without feeling bored at all, Rosina could thrive anywhere as long as she had music. The longer the practice, the happier she was.

I instantly shook my head as hard as I could. “No thank you! I request a standard study session. I will take it quite seriously, I assure you!”

Rosina smiled and held out my instrument with a bright “Very well.” I took it from her and got into playing posture. But when I tried playing the first practice song I had been given, I discovered that she was right. My skill had plummeted while I was sick and I couldn’t play the song well anymore. That didn’t bode well for learning to play the second song. With cold sweat running down my back, I practiced hard until third bell rang.

“That was an impressive degree of focus.” Rosina smiled warmly and praised me after third bell rang. Getting a compliment from a beautiful girl never felt bad. *Time to go to the workshop!* I thought with brimming happiness, only for Fran to stand in my way.

“The High Priest’s administrative paperwork has piled up due to your extended absence, and he has grown worried upon hearing of your sickness. Let us go to his office.” Fran had no intention of budging either. The High Priest probably did get worried after I spent so many days sick at home. But I wanted to go to the workshop. I wanted to skip helping the High Priest so I could get started making ink already.

“Awww... Fran...”

“When afternoon comes I will have no complaints. I will accompany you to the workshop.”

“Sister Myne, at times like this you must continue to smile without showing any emotion. And please remember that there will be many times in life where you are forced to do things you dislike.”

Unable to argue with Rosina, who had been given a stack of financial boards to work her way through before lunch, I hung my head sadly. *How could I smile at a time like this?* I thought tearfully as I forced a twitchy smile onto my face.

“You are right, Rosina. I understand. Off to the High Priest’s room we go...” I headed to the High Priest’s room with slumped shoulders. I didn’t dislike helping him with his paperwork or anything, but the fact that I had something a lot more fun waiting for me really put a damper on my spirits.

“Ah, I see you have finally recovered. Come here, Myne.” The second he saw me, the High Priest handed me the sound-blocking magic tool. I gripped it so we could talk.

“It seems that all the gray priests in the orphanage cleaned the chimneys and fireplaces far earlier than expected this year. What are you plotting?”

“Please do watch your phrasing, honorable High Priest. I have no plots, only a desire to make ink that will work well on plant paper. The gray priests gathered the soot I needed for it and did nothing more.” I explained what happened and the High Priest rubbed his forehead.

“I see. I understand now that you needed to do it for your workshop. But take care not to overstep your bounds and anger the High Bishop.”

I hadn’t seen him in so long I had actually forgotten about him, but yeah, the High Bishop was a person who existed and he sucked. Was I the only one who thought I would anger the High Bishop no matter what I did?

After helping the High Priest and finishing lunch, I could finally go to the workshop. Lutz predicted that I would be held up all morning and had been directing the paper making in the meantime.

“There’s a lot of stuff you need to do that built up over the past five days, yeah? Some good daily routine is just what you need to cool your head, Myne.”

“...Well my head sure has cooled off now.”

The three things I needed were lined up at the workshop and split into groups: the soot everyone gathered, the linseed oil that Benno bought, and the lime that Lutz bought.

“I have heard that you all worked together to gather soot for me. I greatly appreciate that. Today, I would like to make ink. This is labor that requires significant strength, so only adult gray priests will be participating. Everyone else may continue making paper as usual.”

After thanking everyone and splitting up the workforce, it was time to make ink. “Now then, Lutz. Please begin.”

Lutz was my biggest helper here. It seemed he had memorized everything I explained to him just fine, as he put the soot on the marble slab and dug holes for the oil without any issue. Once the oil was in, he used the scraper to flatten and mix it all thoroughly. I still remembered the time I made oil paint in the past, so I was confident this part would go well. But I hadn’t sought out particularly high-quality soot or oil, so it was very possible that the paint would turn out poorly regardless of technique.

“The mixing seems to be going well. I believe now is the time to switch to the pestle.” Lutz started off with a small amount since paint ends up better if mixed bit by bit, and that seemed to be going well. Once it was all mixed together he switched out for a pestle and began grind, grind, grinding it. He kept on crushing and grinding the mixture without pause.

Sweat formed on his brow and he put all his might into his arms

as he crushed the mixture into paint that would serve as ink, his face going bright red in the process. I couldn't help him since I was a blue shrine maiden, and even if I tried, I would just get in his way. Grinding the paint mixture took far more strength than I had right now. I had summoned a gray priest to stand at the ready since I predicted it would be too hard for a kid to do, but Lutz finished it without a single complaint.

"That is a suitable amount of silkiness and stickiness." I quickly took out the stamp Dad made and pressed it hard against the freshly made paint a few times before pressing it against some ripped volrin paper. The letters spelling "Myne" appeared on it and an audible stir went through those watching.

"...She really did make ink."

"To think it needed only soot and oil..."

The gray priests, having seen something new be created for the first time in their lives, looked at the oil paint with wide eyes. It seemed they hadn't entirely believed that soot and oil would actually make anything. Paint workshops probably made their paint with a similar method, but the priests never had any opportunity to see it. It was possible that their paint-making methods were also trade secrets.

"Everyone else, please gradually make the oil paint as he did. Put the finished ink here." Fran got the container for the oil paint and Lutz put his ink inside it. Although it was a bit confusing, paint or really any substance used for printing could be called ink.

"Lutz, please wash your hands with this soap and get some rest."

A gray priest began making ink in Lutz's place, and two others brought different tools and joined him, adding bits of oil to the soot and starting to mix. While they were hard at work doing that, I took the finished oil paint and tried using the pointed tip of a shaved bit of wood to write letters on paper and draw lines on a board. It was too sticky and thick to be a replacement for normal ink. But it seemed like it would work just fine for the woodblocks. The main thing was that I would need a roller like I used in art class to spread the ink evenly, since the thickness would vary too much without it. Getting a clean woodblock print would be a bit difficult without a roller or at least a paint brush.

"How's the ink, Myne?" Lutz came back after washing his hands and face, but his fingertips were still a bit black. We would need a stronger soap.

"It works, more or less. Now I want ink in other colors..."

"Other colors? You can make it colored?" Lutz's eyes widened. I told him it was made the same way, just with different pigments. Making ink in other colors wouldn't be impossible. I just wasn't sure where or how I would get those other pigments.

“What other pigment is there than soot?”

“As far as I know, most pigments are made from pulverized minerals. Or in more simple terms, if you take colored rocks and break them into fine powder, you can make paint out of it with oil just like you did with soot.”

Iron oxide and loess (a combination of clay, sand, and wind-blown silt sometimes called yellow clay) were historically used as pigments. Blue colors made from lapis lazuli and azurite were fairly prevalent, as were reds made from rouge and cinnabar. But I had no idea if I could look at the minerals here and tell which were which.

“...Uh, Myne. Does that mean someone’s gotta hit the rocks until they’re all powder?” asked Lutz timidly, afraid of having to do that himself. I shook my head. Naturally, I had no intention of making Lutz break his back pounding rocks to bits. That was too much for a kid.

“Surely someone’s job is to do that. I asked Mom about the pigments at her dyeing workshop, but she told me more people asking for pigments would increase the cost of dyes.” According to Mom, some conflict broke out in the past when the number of art workshops increased and the materials for dyes got more expensive in turn. She asked me not to do anything that would cause problems like that, since she would lose her job. Naturally, I couldn’t do anything that would hurt my mom like that.

Directly mining the minerals seemed like a big leap, but I could imagine that buying the pigments would be too expensive. Especially problematic was that I didn’t even know where one could mine the minerals that would make pigments. How could I, when I had only ever left the city to go to a nearby forest?

“I guess yellow clay would be the simplest thing to get if I just knew where to find it. We’d have to pound it into a powder, but yellow clay is usually powder already.”

“But like I said, who’s gonna do that?” It was written on Lutz’s face that he had no intention of doing it himself. I didn’t have the tools or manpower to break up rocks, so giving up on this idea seemed wise for now.

“...If we go to a mineral store like a lumber store, they might have tiny chunks of rock for sale. Too bad pulverizing them would be so hard. Maybe we should try asking an art workshop about how they make their paint?”

“Master Benno said they wouldn’t talk about their paint, just the tools.”

“More trade secrets. Figures.”

The three gray priests finished their oil paint as Lutz and I talked. They finished faster than Lutz since they had the strength of adults. I couldn’t help but smile as I saw the porcelain container fill up with

paint.

“The stamp worked and colored ink can come later, which means it’s time to make the picture books using woodcuts.”

“Let’s stop with the ink for today. Making it takes a lot of work. My arms feel heavy as heck.”

“Okay. About the paper, then. Could you make some thicker paper for the picture books? Like, kinda a lot of it?”

“Sure. You get some rest while you think about the picture books. Alright?”

With the oil paint basically complete, I wanted to move straight to making the picture books. I walked around the workshop to encourage the kids swishing water and making paper, then returned to my room.

I headed for my desk and immediately began writing an adaptation of the bible for kids on the paper Benno gave me. The stories didn’t need to be that detailed for the picture book, and I tried to keep my vocabulary as simple as possible. Once done, I read over my work. Everything seemed fine. All I had to do was ask the High Priest if I could make it into a picture book.

“Oh, right. I need to talk to Wilma about drawing the art... Rosina, would you come to the orphanage with me? I need to talk to Wilma about something.” Wilma, uncomfortable around men as she was, would no doubt prefer for me to go with Rosina rather than Fran.

Rosina was in the middle of glaring at boards while receiving work instructions from Fran, and the moment I called out to her, her expression beamed into a smile. *She must really hate math.*

“Fran, I must go. Sister Myne needs me.” Rosina started putting away her things. Fran nodded at her and handed over several boards.

“Please deliver these to Wilma while you are there. She seems to struggle with math as well, but she will need to learn if she is to watch over the girls’ building.”

Rosina blinked after being given both the boards she had been working on and boards related to the girls’ building, but ultimately smiled without missing a beat. *...That’s Rosina for you. She didn’t show her surprise for a second.*

I went to the orphanage with Rosina, who was carrying the boards, paper, and some ink. Wilma seemed to be cleaning and making soup while the kids were working in the orphanage. She really was the orphanage’s mother.

“Oh my, hello Sister Myne. I see Rosina is with you. Please, have a seat.” Wilma greeted us with a warm smile, and I ended up smiling as well. My life truly was enriched by having two beautiful girls as attendants. I took a seat in the dining hall and explained my business as Rosina and Wilma followed from behind.

“As discussed earlier, I would like you to draw art for a bible

picture book. I have also brought with me paperwork from Fran. It seems he would like you to go through these, given that you are overseeing the girls' building."

Wilma paled slightly at the pile of boards, and probably not because she was considering why it was called paperwork when no paper was involved. Rosina in the past had been consoled by Wilma that all attendants had to overcome their weaknesses, and now it was her turn to console Wilma with a smile of assurance. "Attendants must do work of this form, and although it may be painful now, you will grow accustomed to it over time as a matter of necessity. Practice is important in both math and art. Isn't that right, Sister Myne?"

"It is. The more you practice, the faster you will get and the fewer errors you will make. Join us in overcoming our flaws, Wilma."

Unable to argue, Wilma hung her head sadly and took the boards. I had her and Rosina read my simplified adaptation of the bible so they could point out anything I shouldn't have cut out and stuff like that. Wilma suggested that I use all the words on the karuta so that kids could learn to read easier, and with great difficulty I managed to make that work. In the meantime Wilma sketched illustrations on boards that were about half the size of an A5 piece of paper. That art would be carved into wood to make a woodcut later.

"I thank you ever so much, Wilma. I will have these carved to make the picture books. Once they are finished, perhaps we can write a continuation."

"Yes, I would like that."

I excitedly returned to my chambers with the boards Wilma drew on, only to find Lutz waiting for me with a furious expression.

"Myne, didn't I tell you to rest in your room?"

"Wha? Didn't you tell me to think about the picture book's story? No...?" It seemed I had misheard him a little. And so Lutz got furious at me for not resting in my room quietly.

Making Picture Books with Woodblock Printing

I added the text of my picture book to the woodcut art Wilma drew, but written mirrored for printing purposes. Lutz would take the woodcut home to have the art and design carved out. The art was pretty detailed, which made me worried, but Lutz just shrugged and said that Ralph and Sieg would make sure it got done.

While Lutz and his brothers were carving the woodcut, I requested a meeting with the High Priest to show him my simplified bible text and get permission to use it in religious picture books. Although I had only simplified it as much as necessary for kids to understand, I imagined that getting permission to modify the bible and make pictures books out of it would be wise.

He took me to his secret room to talk, as he always did when he wanted to hear the precise details of whatever new thing I was inventing. I thought that just using the sound-blocking magic tool would be enough, but he said he couldn't be sure if what I was bringing should be shown to others until he heard about it alone first.

"A bible for children, hm? That would be useful for teaching them letters and grammar."

"I'll be making them into picture books, and I plan to teach the orphans to read with them as well."

"The orphans? For what purpose?"

To be honest, I didn't have a particularly noble purpose. I just wanted to increase literacy around the world, starting with those around me.

"They'll have to learn to read eventually if they want to be attendants, and I wouldn't want the employees of the Myne Workshop to be unable to read the books it will soon be creating."

"I see, so you speak from the perspective of a merchant?" The High Priest looked over my modified bible text and murmured that it was good enough. He then looked at me, his light-gold eyes narrowed sharply. "Myne, where exactly were you educated? What training have you received?"

His question was so out of the blue that the smile on my face vanished and I stiffened up. My heart began to pound and my blood raced through me with sickening speed. "I do not quite understand what you mean." I really didn't understand. Where in the world had

his question come from?

The High Priest, keeping his eyes locked onto me so as to observe my reaction, smacked a finger against the paper I had given him. "...This text is far too well constructed. It is no easy feat to isolate the key points of the bible, as wordy and difficult to read as it is, and simplify it all into something easy for children to understand. You could barely recognize any words of the bible when I first read it to you. Writing this should be far beyond your abilities."

Fear stirred in my heart. Now that I thought about it, I had never shown the High Priest anything I had written all on my own before. I just did the repetitive math when helping him with his paperwork, and all letters to him were written with Fran's instructions. The story I had given him must have stuck out, given that I needed Fran's help to write letters and had only a weak grasp on a lot of vocabulary despite learning to read to be a merchant.

"...Are you saying I did a good job?"

"Yes, extremely. Such a good job I might believe that you are a foreigner who received strict education in another language, and simply did not know the language of this country." He looked at me with the guarded look he might give a spy.

I tightened my lips. Was the High Priest incredible for having derived that much from a single story, or was I just too stupid to have realized how abnormal my writing skills were for my supposed age?

...Probably both. I let out a slow sigh while my mind raced to think of an answer. Unlike Lutz, I couldn't trust the High Priest enough to tell him everything. He seemed to think a bit differently from the other blue priests here, but that was because he thought and acted from the perspective of a noble rather than the perspective of a priest. I couldn't even imagine what someone with significant political power would do with someone like me.

"High Priest, I was born and raised in this city. I have never left except to go gathering in the woods. This is the first time I have ever even heard that other countries exist." Myne really hadn't left this town. In her youth, it was rare for her to even leave her home. It was obvious that she never had any opportunity to be educated. But my reassurance did not satisfy the High Priest's doubts, and he continued to eye me.

"The investigation I conducted certainly unearthed nothing suspicious. And yet, it simply does not make sense."

My relationship with the High Priest had been fairly positive up until now. If he were to grow suspicious of me, I would have no blue-robe allies within the temple. It was thanks only to the High Priest's influence that I could exist here without encountering other blue priests. If he turned against me now, I would have no safety net while

I still didn't know left from right when it came to the temple's culture.

...That would be a problem. A huge problem. I had to tell the High Priest something, but lies would get me nowhere. I didn't have a good memory like him. If I tried telling lies, I would forget what I had said before the week was up. A hole would immediately form in any web of falsehoods I tried spinning. I had to trick him without telling any lies.

"...I have been asked a similar question in the past, about my recipes. They asked me how I learned them."

"And? How did you answer?"

With the High Priest leveling his sharp gaze at me, I answered. "Within a dream. I told them I learned the recipes in a dreamlike place to which I can never return. Would you believe me if I gave you the same answer?" I didn't know how the High Priest would react to that, but I had no better answer to give. I kept looking into his eyes and clenched my fist, mouth shut tightly.

...I answered his questions, and I didn't lie. My body felt hot as sweat dripped down my back, but I felt a chill in the air as we glared at each other without pause. I honestly don't know how long we sat there in silence.

Eventually, the High Priest spoke with a sigh. "...I cannot say either way." His brows were still furrowed, but it seemed like his gaze was a little less sharp than before. I had expected his eyes to sharpen further and for him to say something like "quit messing around" or "give a real answer." If that happened I would have doubled down and told him I hadn't lied, but I didn't have any answer prepared for the direction he took it in instead.

"Although it sounds comically unrealistic, it would explain many of the mysteries surrounding you. My prediction that you were educated elsewhere would be proven correct as well. Not to mention, you are hideously poor at lying and your thoughts are always written on your face. No noble in the world would find themselves tricked by you or unable to read your emotions."

"Ngh..." I pressed on my cheeks so he wouldn't be able to read any more of my emotions, and he began tapping a finger against his temple.

"But that is exactly why this is so troubling. I will need time to think on this matter. You may leave, for now." He returned the paper I had given him, and I left the secret room alone. I felt the daggers of his gaze on my back along the way.

The next day, I stayed home from the temple and went shopping with Benno and the others to get the tools I needed for woodblock printing. This was something I had to do. I wasn't just avoiding the

temple since it would be awkward seeing the High Priest there. Absolutely not.

“So what the hell do you need to buy, anyway?”

“I would like paint brushes and (rollers) to paint the woodcut.”

“Huh? What was that second one?” Lutz and Benno blinked in confusion. I tried explaining what a roller was using as simple terms as possible.

“Ummm, you take a tube-like cylinder and put a handle on it so you can, like, roll it around.”

“...Yeah, I’m not following.” They both sighed heavily, neither of them understanding my explanation at all. If Lutz didn’t know it despite his exposure to construction tools, they probably didn’t exist at all in the city.

“Anyway, let’s try checking out a store.”

Benno took me to the art supply store that the art workshop had told him about. They apparently sold mortars (in the shape of boards) and pestles there. I looked to see if they had paint brushes or rollers, but not even the storekeep understood when I tried explaining what a roller was. They had wide paint brushes, but unfortunately no rollers.

“Well, that’s that. What’re you gonna do without that roller thing, Myne?”

“I’ll see what I can do with paint brushes. If those don’t work, I’ll just have to order a roller in the smithy.”

“Dunno if they’ll understand what you’re talking about, though.” Benno snorted out a laugh, but I was sure Johann would understand my explanation if I gave precise measurements with corresponding drawings. I believed in him.

I returned home with Lutz after finishing shopping. The cool autumn breeze blew over us as we walked with held hands.

“Can’t wait for tomorrow,” he said as we casually walked home without a care in the world. “I didn’t mention it earlier so you wouldn’t go berserk before we went shopping, but my brothers finished that woodcut you wanted. I’ll bring it to you once we get back.”

“Yay!”

Once we got home I waited in my room, brimming with excitement until Lutz brought the carved woodcut to me. He handed it over and I could tell from a quick look that there were more than a few messed up parts.

“By the way, Myne. They wanted me to tell you that it was a real pain in the neck getting this done. There’s just too many tiny details.”

“...I can kinda tell that just by looking at it.”

Lutz passed on the message with clear reluctance. There were multiple parts where the cuts were too deep or the lines too

disjointed, probably from them cutting with too much force at times and letting momentum get the best of them. It didn't help that they weren't used to carving out woodcuts, but Wilma's art being so detailed was definitely a factor here. If employees of a carpentry workshop like Ralph and Sieg didn't like doing this, I could imagine it wouldn't be easy to make woodcuts for a book's worth of pages.

"Maybe I'll ask Ingo's workshop to do the carvings if this woodcut works like I want it to."

"...Yeah. Getting work done officially through a workshop would be smart. This work's too hard for a side job." Lutz nodded at my suggestion, but I still felt sad—hiring Ingo meant the base cost of making the book would be significantly higher.

"So, how're you gonna use the brush?" Lutz's thoughts had already ventured towards the printing. He took the brush we bought out of my bag and fiddled with its bristles. I grabbed the baren I made earlier and brought over some ripped pieces of paper to explain how woodblock printing worked.

"First, we spread out the scrap paper and put the woodcut on top of it. Then we cover it with ink. We'll want to use the tip of the paintbrush to rub the ink in and make sure it's spread equally." I gave Lutz instructions while rubbing the bare paint brush against the woodcut. He watched carefully while noting down the instructions on the diptych.

"This is where we would want a roller. It could spread the ink equally just by rolling around on top of it, but there's no use crying over what we don't have. Once the ink's spread, put the paper on top, put a layer of scrap paper on top of that, and then rub the (baren) all over it while pressing down to get the ink on the paper. Keep the force steady and don't go extra hard or gentle anywhere."

I rolled my homemade baren over the paper in a circular fashion, and Lutz murmured in surprise about how that weird thing he saw me making was actually useful for something.

"Then you gently peel the paper off and wait for it to dry. Done!"

"...Alright, I get how it works now. We're gonna try it out tomorrow, right?"

I went to the temple with trepidation, but the High Priest didn't say anything in particular when we saw each other. He just expressionlessly listed out his normal instructions as if nothing had happened. It was a huge relief when I managed to finish my work without him saying anything else. *Okaaay, that's the biggest hurdle cleared.* Onward to the woodcut.

"Now then, if you would excuse me." I left the High Priest's room with my heart full of song and my mind full of woodblock printing.

The High Priest was staring daggers into my back, but let's not think about that right now.

"Sister Myne, you seem exceptionally pleased," noted Fran.

"Of course," I replied, already humming a little bit. "I've finished helping the High Priest and now I can make picture books in the workshop."

By the time lunch was over and I was on my way to the Myne Workshop, I was so excited it was probably unhealthy for me.

"I have arrived. Let us begin printing at once. Now, Lutz. I believe you know what to do." When I arrived at the workshop, Lutz had more or less finished preparing for the printing. Scrap paper was spread out on top of a table, and the woodcut on top of that. Curious children were surrounding the table.

"Sister Myne, what are we doing here?"

"Ahaha. You will see soon."

I headed to the table and the crowd of children parted to form a viewing spot for me. There I stood while Lutz did his work. He put the ink on the brush and painted the carved part of the woodcut black, which made the kids cry out with excitement.

"Wow, it's all black! I can't see the picture anymore!"

Lutz raised an eyebrow at their excitement, but continued his steady work without pause. He gently placed a piece of volrin paper on the ink-slathered woodcut and rubbed the baren against it just like I had demonstrated yesterday.

"Wow, that looks fun! I wanna try it."

"Me too, me too!"

Lutz set the baren aside, took off the scraps, and picked at the corner of the paper. As everyone watched with excitement, he gently peeled the paper off. The ink was stuck to the slightly rolled paper just as I thought it would be, forming a successful woodblock print.

"Wow, it's a picture! The block was all black, but there's white lines on the picture!" The kids beamed smiles and chattered with excitement over how a pitch-black block made detailed art on paper. After instructing them to return to swishing pulp in suketas, I looked at the printed picture with Lutz.

"How is it, Myne?"

"...Not perfect." Despite how excited I was to have printed a picture, I felt conflicted. It definitely had more artistic depth to it than the woodcut I made in art class back in elementary school, though. Asking Lutz's brothers to make it instead of trying to do it myself had been the right call. "It's fine as a woodblock print, but I don't think this is good enough for a picture book."

"Yeah. The lines aren't impossible to read or anything, but white letters on black aren't the best, I think?" It did kinda hurt to read

white letters on black text, and I had messed up the mirrored writing at points. That was my fault, but since the woodcut had both the art and the text on it, we'd need to make a new one from scratch to fix it. Not to mention that the art was so dark that it was actually kinda scary on top of all the mistakes. Lutz's brothers not being used to carving detailed art didn't help, but regardless, it would be hard to sell a picture book with art of this quality.

"Maybe I should use a stamp for the letters? Like, have a stamp made with all the text on it?"

"Making the woodcut's already too much work to be worth the time; a stamp with all the text on it's just outta the question. It'd be way harder to carve *around* the letters to make them stand out than to just carve out the letters themselves."

"That's true... I might need to rethink this. Woodblock printing itself might not be good for picture books. The art being so filled with black is kinda scary, too." I put the printed paper on top of a shelf and Lutz started cleaning up. There was no point in printing more when they would all end up just as flawed.

...Mmm, I think copperplate etching would be better for printing Wilma's art, but... I didn't think I'd have an easy time getting corrosive agents like nitric acid to start copperplate etching, and finding alternatives on my own would probably be a huge hassle. Not to mention that I didn't want anything that dangerous used in a workshop where little kids hung around.

...But what to do, then? At this point failing didn't depress me that much, but in this case I had failed after getting Wilma to draw the art and Lutz's brothers to carve the woodcut. It would be hard to tell them that it didn't work out and to ask for their help in the future without any guarantees that I would succeed.

"What's on your mind?" Lutz finished cleaning up and came back.

"I'm thinking that maybe I should just give up on adding art to the kid's bible. It'll still be a book if it has words in it, sooo..."

"Doesn't make a difference to me, but uh, can you call it a picture book if it doesn't have pictures?"

"No. It would just be a normal book, not a picture book."

"Weren't you all pumped to give your first picture book to your little brother or sister? Something about it being your first gift to them as their older sister?"

"Oh! You're right! I can't compromise here! I need to make an amazing picture book, no matter what!"

I can't give up over a single failure or two. I need to move on from woodblock printing and think of something new.

Black-and-White Picture Books

I came to the conclusion that woodblock printing wasn't good for picture books, but I couldn't let myself give up there. On the way back home, Lutz and I discussed what went wrong.

"They say that failure is the mother of success, so working out what went wrong should be a step towards succeeding next time."

"Yeah, makes sense. Why do you think things went bad?" asked Lutz while nodding, and I got to thinking. Three issues sprung to mind immediately.

"First of all, I think the art was too complicated for carving. Wilma's detailed illustrations were a bad match for woodcuts that have to be carved out with precision."

It would be unreasonable to make Wilma redraw the same art for each picture book, so I would need to either find a method of printing that didn't involve woodcuts or alternatively have Wilma adopt a more simplistic style. However, Wilma had never seen art outside of what adorned the temple halls. I couldn't expect her to be able to just up and change her style on the spot. At the very least, I would need an example she could mimic and learn from.

"My mirrored writing wasn't the best, either. I'll need to be more careful when writing. I think a little more focus should fix it? Maybe I could have someone with me to double-check what I'm doing."

"Meh, at that point, wouldn't it be better to just make separate blocks for the art and writing? That way the art block'll be fine even if you get the letters wrong."

"Lutz, you're a genius!" I had kind of visualized the writing and the art together since it was a picture book for kids learning to read, but I had more options than that. For instance, I could have art on the left page with text on the right page, or art on the top of a page with writing on the bottom of a page.

"Last is the carving. There were a lot of mistakes that stood out in the art." Mistakes like the lines of the art going off course or a letter being missing stood out a lot once the page was printed. But my assertion made Lutz pout a bit.

"That's 'cause we didn't have the tools to carve properly. My brothers aren't bad carvers or anything."

"You don't have the tools for carving...? Aren't you from a family of carpenters?" I asked, recalling what I knew about Lutz's family. He

shrugged.

“My family’s got tons of big tools for cutting up wood since we’re heavy in construction. But we don’t have tools for really precise carving. We normally don’t need them.”

Now that he mentioned it, the tools Deid usually used for work and the ones he needed to maintain his home wouldn’t be the kinds of tools necessary for precise carving. My dad had a lot of tools for big projects, but when it came to carving he only had knives at best.

“That art’s just too detailed to carve with knives.”

“Wha? They carved that woodcut with knives?” One could say the woodcut was very well done for something carved with knives. Really, I should have prepared carving tools for them before giving them the job. “I’ll have to remember to give them tools when I ask them to carve something from now on. Could you tell them I’m sorry, and thank you?”

“Yeah, sure. But how did all this turn into a kid’s bible, anyway?” asked Lutz, so I thought back to how making a picture book for the baby turned into making a children’s bible.

“I guess because Wilma can only draw religious art?”

“So it doesn’t have to be a bible? Remember, this is for a baby.” I had to leave the art to Wilma since everyone hated on my drawings, and since Wilma only drew religious art, I changed the picture book to a children’s bible to match.

...Wait. Now that he mentions it, won’t a children’s bible be kinda useless for a baby? I realized the horrible truth. Books for babies and books for children were a lot different. I couldn’t just bundle them all together as “books for young people.”

“Okay! I’ll make a black-and-white picture book for the baby first. The children’s bible can come later!”

“We’ve only got paper and ink, so anything you make’s gonna be a black-and-white picture book.”

“That’s true, but this is a little different.” I needed to go back to the drawing board and think about what kind of picture book I would want to give the baby. I thought back to what I’d learned in books about babies and in infant health class.

First of all, it was thought that newborn babies had blurry vision. Eyesight was tightly connected to the development of the brain, and they grew by seeing a variety of different things each day. They would grow to distinguish bright colors like red by the time they were three to four months old, and their eyes would start to track movement.

They had about the same eyesight as an adult about a year after their birth, but before that outlines tended to be a little blurry and they struggled to distinguish more faint colors. That meant a book for babies below the age of one would want to have high-contrast and

easy to understand shapes. For colors, it was easiest for them to recognize white, black, and red, whereas for shapes it was easiest for them to recognize distinct ones like circles, triangles, and squares. That was why books for zero- to two-year-old babies had simple lines, bright colors, and simple text that repeated itself.

I thought back on picture books for babies I had seen and remembered a black-and-white one with nothing but shapes and their names. Even I could manage to draw something like that.

“Lutz, I’m staying home today to make a picture book for the baby!”

“Alright. I’ll contact the temple and come help out once I’ve checked up on the Myne Workshop. When you start making something you’re always a danger to yourself and others, Myne. Gotta keep an eye on you.” Lutz shook his head with exasperation and, unable to argue, I immediately changed the topic.

“Okay, I want some thick paper for this. Could you bring about ten finished pieces from the workshop for me to purchase?” Although I was the forewoman of the Myne Workshop, I needed to buy the paper from Lutz to keep the workshop’s financial records in order.

And so, Lutz came to my house the next day after third bell.

“Oof, this place is a mess. Effa’s gonna be ticked.”

Soot pens, my notepad made of failed paper, and slate pens were scattered over the table. If Mom were here she would definitely tell me to clean up, but with her and Tuuli at work, there was no one to get mad at me.

I was sketching designs on my slate to brainstorm what I wanted to draw in the picture book. Once I decided on something, I flipped to a new page on my notepad and drew it with a soot pen. It was easier to get an idea of what the black-and-white art would look like on paper. Dad had a tool for drawing straight lines in his toolbox, so I took that out and was using it to help me draw. I drew a triangle, then a square, then stopped when it was time to draw a circle. I wanted a compass for it.

“Lutz, do you have a (compass) at your place? Something that looks like this and makes pretty circles by, um...” I drew a compass on the slate and used two fingers to demonstrate how it worked, earning a nod from Lutz.

“Oh, a compass? I feel like we used to have one, but not anymore.”

“Darn. No helping that. Guess I’ll try substituting it with some other stuff.”

I got some of the thread stored nearby and wrapped it around the end of the soot pen. This would be easier if I had a pointed pin, but I

didn't, so I wrapped the thread around a nail I found in the toolbox instead. I held down the flat end of the nail with my left finger, pulled the soot pen away until the thread was taut, then moved it around in a circle. Everything would be fine as long as I didn't move the nail.

"Woah, nice." Most people didn't need to draw perfect circles, and those who did for work just used compasses. Lutz had never seen my thread method before and sounded impressed. It wasn't common for someone to compliment me. Feeling a bit proud I drew various other circles, only to find that tiny circles were hard to get right. I would definitely want a template ruler or stencil templates for drawing a bunch of shapes.

"Lutz, do you know if anywhere sells (template rulers) or (stencil templates)?"

"You lost me."

"...Something like this. A sheet of thin metal or (plastic) that has holes cut out of it to reflect shapes of varying sizes." They were really convenient for drawing the same pattern or shape over and over since you just had to trace along the edges. If compasses existed, stencil templates had to exist too. But Lutz just shook his head in confusion even after I drew one for him. He had apparently never seen one before.

"How do you use those things?"

"Umm, you trace a pen along the edges to draw whichever of the shapes you want."

"...Couldn't you make one of these from thick paper?"

"Wow! Lutz, you're a genius!" I started using a thick piece of paper Lutz brought for the picture book to instead make a stencil template. I drew circles, triangles, and so on with gradually increasing size. Then all I had to do was cut them out to complete the template. It was only after Lutz and I finished drawing the shapes together that I realized how difficult cutting them would be. We literally didn't have the tools for it.

"This is too small for a knife to cut!" exclaimed Lutz. Looking at the knives we had and the size of the shapes on the paper, I had to slump my shoulders. We could manage to cut out the big circle, and most of the straight lines would be fine. But the small circles were out of the question.

"This will just be a repeat of the woodcut without proper tools. Let's have Johann make a (precision knife) for us."

"What're those?"

"Small, thin knives kinda like pens." It would be best to really iron out what I wanted since I would be ordering one from Johann.

Lutz and I changed into our apprentice clothes and went to the smithy with our guild cards and a neatly written supply order on

volrin paper. Craftsman's alley was on the south side of town, so Johann's smithy wasn't too far from my place.

"Hello."

"Heya, welcome." The foreman must have just been dealing with customers, as when we walked in he was sitting at the table with a bunch of boards in front of him. He shot me a grin, reminding me of when I ordered the styluses. "You're that little girl from before. Got another order?"

"Yes. Is Johann here?"

"Yeah, take a seat. I'll call him right over." He stacked the boards and carried them to the back while yelling at Johann that he had a customer. His deep voice echoed through the workshop and Johann came rushing out in no time, his orange hair bundled up.

"Sir! Oh, it's the Gilberta Company. Hello."

"Hi. I would like you to make a (precision knife) for me. Please take a look at this." I held out the volrin paper supply order and turned it around to show the blueprints I'd sketched out. Johann felt the paper, curious, then narrowed his eyes at the design I drew.

"We get a lot of orders for big blades, but nothing this small and narrow. What in the world do you need this for? You're not gonna be able to cut anything with a blade this small."

"It's for cutting plant paper. I need a small blade to cut out tiny circles from it."

"Hmm. This paper, huh? I've never touched any plant paper before." Johann gripped the paper between his fingers, flipped it over repeatedly, and shook it in front of his eyes to get a feel for it. After letting him satisfy his curiosity, I pointed at the blueprints. I wrote a lot of detailed information about the measurements and usage since I knew Johann would want to know all of it.

"So, the handle can be made out of wood, but I would like it made so that you can swap out the blades. For safety's sake the blade needs to fit perfectly into the handle, which is why I want to hire you for this, Johann. It's very precise work."

Johann asked about the blade switching while looking at the blueprint. I gave detailed answers in reply and soon enough Johann's eyes were burning with determination. It seemed I had ignited his craftsman's spirit.

"...Heh. Pretty interesting. It being so easy to swap blades with this design is something else."

"I would also like either a cap to put over it or a special case to carry it. The blade will be dangerously sharp, and its thinness will make it easy to break."

"Guess I should make a bunch of extra blades to swap out just in case."

After settling on things, I paid the foreman the advance payment with my guild card. "Would you please deliver it to the Gilberta Company when you're finished?" I wouldn't be able to pay with physical money if they sent it to my place, but if it were delivered to Benno he would pay for it immediately without issue. I could then pay him in advance with my guild card, which saved me the trouble of carrying around coins.

"Lutz, Myne!" On our way home from the temple ten days after ordering the precision knife, the guard in front of the Gilberta Company called us down. Mark had told him to direct us inside to get our delivery.

"Johann arrived with this box this afternoon. He seemed very excited about it."

Mark gave us a thin box which I immediately took home to finish the stencil template. I didn't have a proper cutting mat for it, which meant I would have to use the table and try not to cut too deep. That would probably hurt the blade. But it was sharp and easy enough to use that I finished the stencil template without any issue.

I put the finished stencil template on top of my notepad and went to town with a soot pen, resulting in a proper black circle.

"...If I use a stencil to put ink on the picture book, won't that make carving out a woodcut unnecessary? Wow. Am I actually a genius?" To put my idea into practice, I used the template to design art for the black-and-white picture book. I drew a large triangle, then another upside down beneath that one, and finally added a rectangle to make a tree-like shape. I drew a big circle then put two circle eyes and a triangle nose inside to make a face. Then I drew a curved hexagon with the compass to make a flower. I was having so much fun drawing that I didn't stop until my family told me to, at which point I cut out the art.

"Look, Lutz! I finished!" I showed Lutz my finished art with excitement. Each was about the size of an A5 piece of paper, the size of the original A4 paper cut in half. Lutz furrowed his brows at the ten pieces of paper, then looked at me like he didn't know what to say.

"Uh, Myne. Is the baby really gonna like that art?"

"O-Of course! Black-and-white art has a lot of contrast, and since these are just different shapes put together, artistic talent has nothing to do with it."

My explanation just made Lutz look even more doubtful. "...Eeeh. Well, if you're happy, that's fine with me."

Despite his suspicion, Lutz started making the picture book in the workshop that afternoon. This time he put on the black ink with the

paintbrush over the stencil. The bristles would push the paper on the smaller parts of the art, so when it came to that I had him tap it with a small stick that had a cloth wrapped around one end.

“Wow, amazing! It worked!”

“...What is this, Sister Myne?”

“What’s it for?”

The children gathered around the art and peered down at it. While having a gray priest set the pages on a shelf to dry, I answered them with a smile.

“It’s for a baby’s picture book.”

“...A baby? Mmm?” None of them really seemed to get it. They tilted their heads and avoided eye contact, each one of them clearly deciding to keep to themselves rather than risk saying anything.

...None of them understood. If only the world could catch up to my genius.

I felt a little isolated, but I finished the pages for the black-and-white picture book. Ideally I would want the pages to spread out like a folding screen, which meant sticking them to boards, cutting holes in the boards, and connecting them with string.

Oh... I need to make the glue for this.

Preparing for the Children's Bible

Regardless of what everyone thought, I finished the pages for the baby's black-and-white picture book. That was enough to satisfy me as I walked home with Lutz, holding hands amid the chilly autumn air.

"Since we're making hide glue after winter prep is done, I want to get back to making the children's bible," I said, wanting to finish a book soon since autumn was the season of reading. Lutz fell into thought.

"Are you gonna try woodblock printing again? Cutting the paper would probably be easier, if even you could handle it." Lutz was right. Making templates for the pages out of paper wouldn't be too hard. It didn't require any arm strength, as was evidenced by the fact that I could do it on my own.

"I won't need to write backwards if I'm just cutting the letters out with a knife, too. That won't be a problem since picture books aren't that wordy. It will kinda hurt my wallet to buy some extra knives, but new projects having a high initial investment is nothing new to us."

The precision knives were a bit expensive since each had to be ordered and custom made, but woodblocks weren't any better since I would need to order carving tools and such for them.

"Isn't that why you've been saving all that money anyway?"

One day, I wanted to make letter punches for this world's alphabet and transition to movable-type printing, but that would need a lot of letter punches. Each would need a lot of precise work, and making the punches out of metal would end up costing more than I could spend right now. It'd be a while before I could shift to movable-type printing.

"Haaah... I've still got a long way to go before I can reach Mr. Gutenberg."

"Who's that?"

"A great man who accomplished so much he may as well be a god to me. My goal is to reach the same heights he did. But all I can do right now is improve what I have. Is there anything you think needs improving, Lutz?"

"...Do you know any tools that could hold the paper down when we're printing? The paper starts slipping the second I lose focus and the ink gets all over my hand, which sucks pretty bad since it doesn't come off easy."

Lutz was an apprentice merchant in a store that did business with nobles. He needed to keep up appearances, so it would be extremely bad if he had the same dirty hands as a craftsman. We could leave all the work to gray priests, but I knew that Lutz was really determined to make my inventions himself. Which meant I just had to think of a way to do this without his hands getting dirty.

“Mmm, it would probably help a lot if I made a (mimeograph) frame.”

“A what-frame?”

“Ummm, opening holes in boards to print with ink is called stenciling, and (mimeographs) are part of that. A (mimeograph) frame or net will hold down the paper so your hands don’t get dirty. Liiike this.”

I took out my diptych and stopped in place to start drawing. Lutz, stunned, pulled me to the side while yelling about not getting in people’s way.

“You make a wooden frame that can open and close over a wooden stand big enough to hold paper. You attach the board to the frame with hinges, with a net inside of the frame. When printing, you put the paper on the board, the stencil on top of it, close the frame to lock them into place, then apply ink from above the net.”

“Huh. If it just needs wood and a net, we might be able to make it ourselves.” It wasn’t that difficult to make, outside of the stencil. Lutz would probably be able to make most of it himself. I would mainly be worried about the frame with the net attached.

“Lutz, do you think we could ask the craftsman who made the mat part of our suketa to make this too? Has he finished all the big mats for the workshop’s larger suketas?”

“...You’ll have to ask Benno and Mark about that.”

The Gilberta Company had just come into view, so on that note, the two of us went inside. Work seemed to be mostly over, as some of the employees were already cleaning up. Everyone was calm, but I felt that they were in a hurry as I looked around the store.

“Oh, if it isn’t Myne and Lutz. The office is open if you have any business.”

We would just get in the way by talking in the store, so Mark took us to Benno’s office without asking him first. He had been in the middle of looking over a ledger of some kind, but he forgave us with a sigh.

“Benno, can I borrow Mark tomorrow? There’s something I want to order from the craftsman who makes our suketas, and I would like Mark to come with us to the workshop. Is the craftsman free right now?” I asked, to which Benno nodded while rolling up the ledger.

“He’s delivered all the orders. Should be free if nobody else has

ordered anything. What're you planning to make this time?"

"A frame with a net."

My answer made Benno frown in confusion. "Huh? A net? What do you need that for?"

"It's so Lutz's hands don't get dirty when he's using ink."

Benno, failing to understand my explanation at all, looked at Lutz for an explanation. Despite having just explained in detail what a mimeograph was to him, he shook his head.

"Forget it. I'll pass the word on to Mark. What time do you need him?"

"I need to practice the harspiel in the morning, so sometime early in the afternoon."

"That's good for us. Tomorrow, then."

After lunch the next day, Lutz and I went to the Gilberta Company and then visited the craftsman with Mark.

"...You all again, huh?" The craftsman greeted us with a grimace so intense I thought his furrowed brows were going to fuse. It was hard to believe he would show such open displeasure at a customer. "Don't tell me you want more of those mat things. I finally finished that hellish order of'm, gimme a break." It seemed that making large suketas was rough work for him. I shook my head as I glanced between the craftsman's exhausted look and Mark's calm smile.

"No, no. We want to order a wooden frame."

"A wooden frame? Go ask a carpenter," said the craftsman while making a shooing motion with his hand at the door.

"Well, it's not just any frame. We want, umm, a silk net in the middle of the frame. Can you do that? It doesn't need to be that tightly knit of a net. We just need it for holding down paper so it doesn't slide around." I took out my stone slate and drew the frame I wanted for him. He narrowed his eyes and glared at the art, then let out a defeated sigh.

"I could manage that. It'd be a pain, but not impossible."

"Will you take the job?"

"Your work takes a lot of time, but you pay well. I'll take any job except making more of those suketa things."

He agreed to make our netted frame for us, so Mark signed the order that would have it delivered to the Gilberta Company when finished.

"Mark, there's one more place I want to go. Would you mind stopping by the smithy? I want to order more knives from there. Also, I want to see if they can make my roller for me."

We would need multiple precision knives to better produce templates for books. I wanted one each for Lutz and me for cutting out

letters, plus one for Wilma. I also wanted a roller to spread the ink more evenly. But the only rollers I knew were rubber rollers and sponge rollers. Who knew if they had something that could work like that. If not, we could try using a wrapped-up cloth, but that probably wouldn't feel good to use.

We went to the smithy and I ordered two more precision knives. Johann accepted with a smile on his face. He seemed extremely excited to take jobs that used the full extent of his talent.

"I would also like a roller, which is like..." I drew one on my stone slate and explained what it was. I tried explaining what rubber and sponge were, but as expected they didn't ring any bells.

"...Rolling around a tube to spread ink, huh? You sure have a lot of weird ideas."

"I want a handle attached to the roller's spindle so I can roll it around smoothly, without it clattering. Any kind of tube should work with a cloth wrapped around it, so I'll leave the materials you use up to you." Ideally there would be some springy material that the ink stuck to as well, but if not we would manage. Johann nodded repeatedly at my explanation.

"That won't be too hard, then. Want me to deliver it to the Gilberta Company again?"

"Yes. Thank you."

After leaving the smithy, Lutz and I said our goodbyes to Mark before starting to walk home ourselves.

"I guess the art is the last problem to tackle. Printing with stencils will make the art end up looking like silhouettes. We can have some thin lines thanks to the precision knives, but how should we change Wilma's art style to fit this?"

"I think it'd be easiest if you got some kind of example for her. Not gonna lie, your explanations kinda suck and I don't think she'd get you if you tried explaining."

It was true that it was nigh impossible to understand something you hadn't seen through just verbal explanations. "Mmm, I'm not sure how helpful it would be, but maybe I should try drawing some examples?"

"Uh. You, Myne? You sure about that?"

"I'll draw based on Wilma's art, it'll be fine. You jerk."

Lutz looked at me with even more worry than before. All I did was draw cartoony art once and now he was convinced I was the worst artist in the world for some reason. *My art was normal on Earth! Normal, I tell you!*

Lutz kept looking worried the whole way home. After we separated at the well, I went home to start drawing the silhouettes of the goddesses with Wilma's art as a reference and a soot pen as my

sword. It was simple, but easier to distinguish than the woodblock print art.

“Yeah, I think this actually looks pretty good.” But that was just my impression as a Japanese person, and I had no idea if the people of this world would feel the same. It was possible that those used to extremely detailed paintings would reject the simplicity of silhouette art.

The next morning, I put the messy woodblock-printed art and my silhouette art into my bag to show Wilma. I also got soot pens and the precision knife ready to give to her.

“Morning, Lutz. This is how the art turned out. Thoughts?” I showed Lutz the silhouette goddess I drew when we met up. He opened his eyes wide, then let out a sigh of relief after looking the art over.

“Hey, it’s not too bad. It’s a lot easier to see than the woodblock stuff.”

“Perfect. I’ll try and see if Wilma can manage to draw more like this.”

After lunch, I headed to the orphanage with all my stuff ready. Rosina accompanied me rather than Fran since we were going to see Wilma.

“Welcome, Sister Myne.”

I put the woodblock art on a dining hall table and pushed it to Wilma. Her expression clouded after she picked it up and saw what it looked like. It wasn’t the art she had envisioned in her head.

“Your art is so detailed, Wilma, that after carving it into woodcuts the result looks like what you see there. I believe that this is a waste of your beautiful art, so I have devised a style that you might like to adopt for this,” I said while pushing the silhouette art her way. I was a bit hesitant to show my amateurish art to a pro, but the discussion would go nowhere if I didn’t.

“This style enables printing that does not need carving. But I am not sure if this style would be universally accepted. I would like to hear your thoughts, Wilma, as both a lover of the arts and a talented artist.”

Wilma looked at the silhouette art and gave a little gasp. “You drew this, Sister Myne...?”

“I tried making an example of what art would look like when made of just black and white, then cut out of paper. What do you think? It would require a large shift in style, but um, do you think you could manage?” I watched Wilma to see how she would react, and after silently looking at the silhouette art for a bit, she nodded with her brown eyes sparkling happily.

“I will try my hand at this style. It is foreign to me, but I would like to give it my best try.”

“In that case, I will present you with these soot pens and a precision knife. You may experiment as you like with the paper I gave you in the past. Here is the thick paper for the template. I will try printing with your first completed picture and see how it goes.”

Wilma looked down at the tools with sparkling eyes as I explained how to use them. That was enough to ease my worries. No doubt Wilma would draw something far, far more wonderful than my attempt.

While Wilma was experimenting with the new art style and stencil technique, I got to work writing the text on paper and cutting them out to make the templates. Johann finished the precision knives and roller faster than I expected, so Lutz and I took our time cutting out the letters using his tools. It was work as difficult and precise as you might think, but I worked hard, knowing that when we finished I would have a printed book ready for me.

The craftsman finished the net before Wilma finished her art. I went to Lutz’s house and asked Ralph and Sieg to make the frame for the net and the wooden stand.

“What the heck do you need this for?”

“I need it so Lutz doesn’t get his hands dirty with ink! Please, I need your help.” I drew the design on a piece of paper and thrust it towards them. They were used to seeing blueprints at work, so Sieg and Ralph got started right after looking at them. They brought out boards and nails while casually chatting among themselves.

“...Eh? How’s this look?”

“Wow! You’re both amazing! That’s exactly what I wanted.” That’s two apprentice carpenters for you. They worked fast and without error, and finished a perfect frame for the net in no time.

Upon being complimented, Ralph snorted and said “I’m getting more like a craftsman just like Lutz is getting more like a merchant” in a teasing tone while looking at Lutz.

“Alright then, Mister Craftsman, get to work on the stand.” Lutz puffed out his cheeks and his brothers laughed while getting back to work.

“Aaah, this ain’t gonna fit. Lutz, could you bring that board over there?”

“Shave the wood off right. You’re gonna be the one using it, yeah? Don’t give yourself any splinters.”

“Sheesh, do some work yourselves, you two.” They were working Lutz hard like always, but the prickly atmosphere from before was completely gone. I sighed to myself in relief.

“Sieg, could you add this so the net stays on the frame?”

At my request, Sieg added metal, teardrop-shaped turn fasteners to the frame. They would keep the net locked in place on the frame. Then hinges were added to connect the frame to the stand. I put a five-millimeter-thick board on the stand as a guide to align the paper when printing, and there it was. We finished the printing stand much, much faster than I expected.

“Th-Thanks, you two. You, uh, you really helped us here.” Lutz looked away, still a little embarrassed to be thanking his family after all that had happened. His brothers also looked away awkwardly.

“This kinda thing’s no problem at all.”

“Yeah, we’re pros. This is just a little side job.”

I always expressed my enormous gratitude for Tuuli with energetic hugs, but this was the best the brothers could manage. Still, it was a big step up from not talking at all. I watched them with a smirk, until eventually they noticed me looking and stiffened up.

“Myne, stop staring!” The fact that all three of them said that at the same time just made me smirk harder.

“Lutz, get Myne outta here!”

“Yeah. We’ll clean up here!”

“You’re coming with me, Myne!” I was dragged out of Lutz’s place after witnessing a level of cooperation they’d never managed before. That was a shame; I wanted to keep watching their heartwarming exchange.

“Myne, stop grinning and think. Is that all you need? It’s just Wilma’s art that’s left, right?” Lutz forcibly changed the topic. It seemed he really didn’t want to talk about how he and his brothers were doing. I giggled and thought over everything I needed to make the book.

We had paper. We had ink. We had the stencil templates with the text. We had a roller. We had a stand for printing. Indeed, all we needed to finish the book’s contents was Wilma’s art. But it would be a little sad for the front cover to be blank white paper.

“Hey, Lutz. If you have the time, could you make some paper with flowers inside? I want that for the front cover.”

“Oh, like what you made all that time ago? It sure was pretty. Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll take the kids to the forest tomorrow.”

With everything else done and waiting on Wilma’s art, I got to spend my afternoons basking in the bliss of reading in the book room. One day, after finishing lunch and pumping myself up for more reading, a kid from the orphanage came and delivered a message to Gil, who came up to my room.

“Sister Myne, Wilma’s finished the art template. The kid that stopped by said she wants you to come get them yourself, since she’s got something to ask you.”

I felt my eyes light up at Gil’s report. The templates being ready meant we could get to printing. “Gil, prepare the workshop for printing after lunch. Rosina, shall we head to the orphanage?”

“Sister Myne, please steady yourself. The orphanage has not yet received the divine blessings.” Rosina’s reminder made me realize that I had forgotten that the orphanage ate lunch after me. Gil laughed as I sat back down.

“I’ll come get you when the workshop’s ready. Maybe memorize some prayers in the meantime,” he said, reminding me of another task the High Priest had given me.

I worked on memorizing prayers as suggested while fidgeting with excitement. The High Priest had told me to memorize these prayers perfectly since they would be used if the Knight’s Order were to request assistance from the temple during autumn.

...Oh, right. I should go check and see how my ceremonial robes are coming along.

After being told the kids had finished lunch, I eagerly went to the orphanage with Rosina. Wilma was waiting for us in the dining hall, wearing an anxious frown of worry in place of her usual gentle smile. On the table was a piece of paper.

“Please look, if you would.”

“My goodness!” Rosina let out an awed cry after peeking over my shoulder.

The delicately sliced template had all of Wilma’s trademark style while still being composed of simple lines. The art portrayed the God of Darkness meeting the Goddess of Light. The God of Darkness was mostly cut out, and the Goddess of Light had the shadows of her hair and the creases in her clothes portrayed brilliantly despite mostly being white paper. I wanted to print it right away to see how it looked when inked.

“This is perfect! Let’s print it at once. Gil should have the workshop already prepared.” I stood up to go to the workshop immediately with Rosina holding the template.

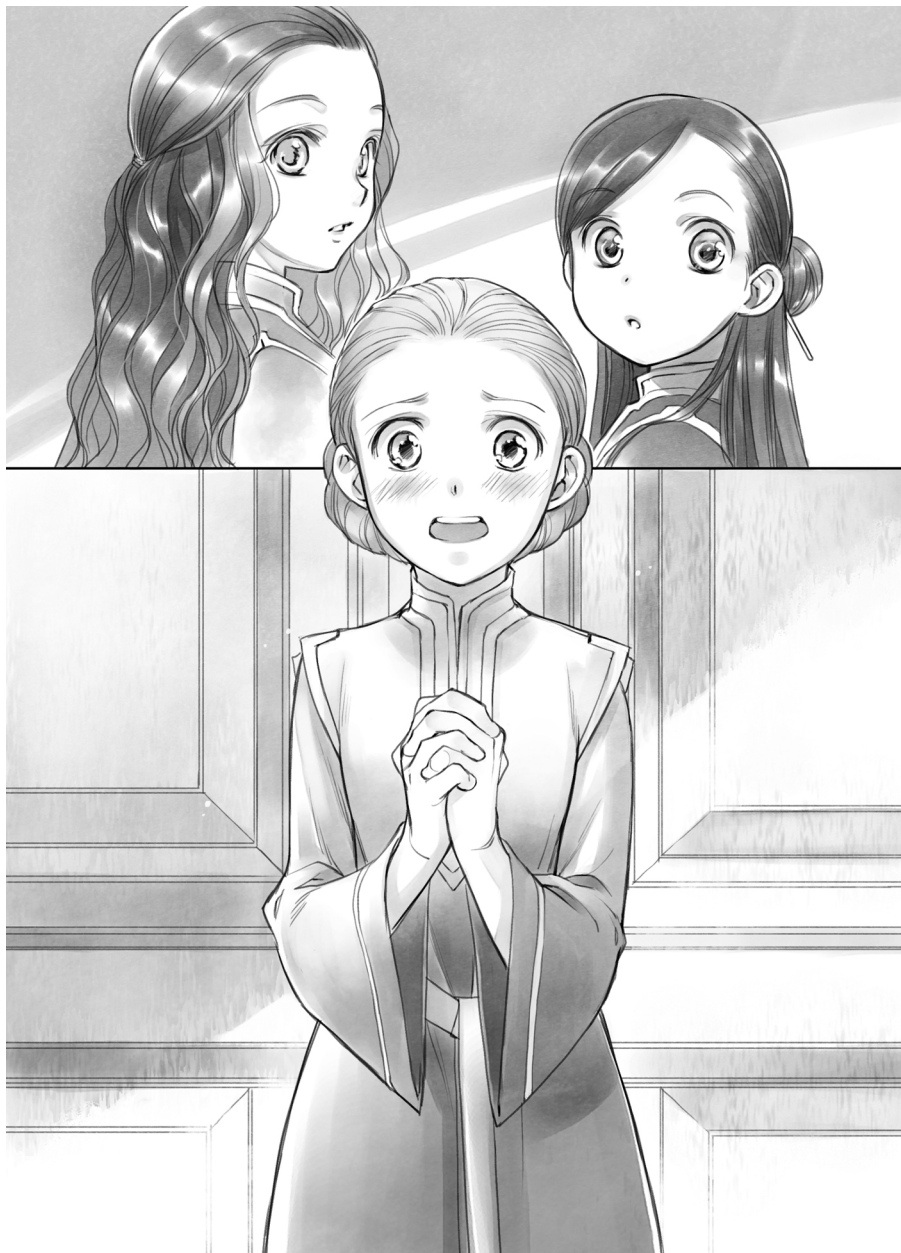
“E-Erm, Sister Myne!” Wilma looked at me as if she had just resolved to make the biggest decision of her life. Her lips trembled as she attempted to speak, and only after clasping her hands so tightly her knuckles went white did she manage to choke out words in a trembling voice. “M-May I please accompany you to the workshop?”

“That is quite alright with me, but will you be okay?” I heard that Wilma had never visited the workshop for fear of all the men there. She was worried about the kids, but her attempts to go there were

always stalled by shaking legs.

“My fear of men remains as strong as ever... But I have just been ever, ever so curious of how my art will look when printed. The woodblock printing did not go as expected, and I do not know if this new method will be more successful.”

To me the woodblock-printed art was just a little weird, but it seemed to have left a big negative impact on Wilma. I could understand very well just how curious Wilma was to see if changing her style and cutting out silhouette art instead of adding tons of detail would make a difference.



But would Wilma be able to handle it, emotionally? There were gray priests in the workshop whether she liked it or not, and there would be no avoiding them. Would that be too much for her to bear with her fear of adult men?

"I believe that my spirit will be sturdy if I remain with you, Sister Myne, but..." Wilma's hesitant words blew away my worry for her in an instant. In its place arose a fierce determination, a divine mission to protect Wilma at any cost.

"I shall allow no man to step foot near you, Wilma. Accompany me and you shall be safe."

"Sister Myne," interjected Rosina, "is it not the job of an attendant to protect her mistress from men?" She sounded exasperated, but I didn't care. What mattered was Wilma being motivated to leave the girls' building of the orphanage, and the fact that she was counting on me.

I took Wilma's hand gently as she rested a hand on her chest, smiling with relief, and then guided her down the stairs to head to the Myne Workshop through the back entrance.

...I will protect Wilma! I have to show her how reliable I can be! The moment I steeled my resolve, I slipped on the stairs and would have fallen down if not for Wilma embracing me from behind and lifting me back up.

"Are you quite alright, Sister Myne?!"

"Y-Yes, certainly."

"...Sister Myne, it is good to be enthused, but you mustn't allow yourself to lose your composure," advised Rosina with a smile, sending daggers through my chest.

Binding Children's Bibles

“Woow! It's Wilma! Wilma's here!”

“Wilma, Wilma. I helped prepare the ink!”

The moment Wilma entered the workshop for the first time, the children let out cries of excitement and gathered around her, each starting to explain what work they did and what they had learned already. The sheer number of kids resulted in an impenetrable child barrier that no gray priest could sneak through. Which meant I had nothing to do despite having resolved to protect her.

“...Shall we begin printing, then?” Slumping my shoulders sadly, I headed to where Lutz was waiting. Wilma followed after me with the child barrier still stuck to her.

“Lutz, would you please print the front page and the back page first? The back page is the one with the printing information. I would like to ensure that the roller spreads ink evenly.”

Lutz placed a piece of paper on the printing stand, then put the two pieces of template paper over that. The stand was A4 size, while the template paper was A5 size (exactly half as big). Our plan for this picture book was to have templates for both the text and art, with one on the top of the stand and the other on the bottom. For this first try, the top would have the front page and the bottom would have the back page.

“Like this?” After checking with me that he was doing it right, Lutz lowered the netted frame and took out the ink. He used the marble slab to mix it with a little oil using the scraper, then put some ink on the roller and rolled it around to spread it evenly.

With all the preparations complete, Lutz glanced at me. I nodded and he slowly began moving the roller on top of the net. He rolled it vertically and horizontally multiple times each, then set the roller on the marble slab. Then he lifted up the wooden frame and the template papers stuck to the net thanks to the ink, leaving only the printed paper on the stand.

The words were cleanly printed on top of the white paper. There weren't any smudges and the lines weren't shaky.

“The printing was a complete success. Please put the paper on the drying shelf.” After checking the printed title and publication data, I handed the paper to a nearby gray priest, who put it on the shelf. Meanwhile, Lutz put a fresh sheet of paper on the stand and began

printing more. The templates wouldn't last too long, so we needed to print as many sheets with them as we could.

My plan was to print thirty copies of this picture book. One to bring home, one to leave in my chambers, one for Lutz, one for Benno, one for the High Priest, and the rest for the orphanage to use as educational material.

"Please prepare to print the art and story text next."

My instructions made Wilma tense up. Lutz swapped out the templates, removing the title and publication templates to put the art and text templates there instead. He made sure to angle them carefully, since when the page was held horizontally and folded, the art would be on the right side and the text would be on the left side. He left a decent amount of white space in the middle since that part would end up as part of a big crease when we threaded the completed book together.

I felt Wilma and Lutz both looking at me, so after making eye contact with both of them, I gave a gradual nod. Lutz spread the ink, looking just as tense as Wilma did. My heart was thumping at the same speed that Lutz moved the roller. *Will it end up okay? Will the art look good enough for Wilma?*

As I watched on, praying for success, Lutz set aside the roller and lifted up the frame. I heard everyone watching, including myself, swallow hard.

"...Wow! Amazing!"

The first to speak were the children surrounding Wilma. Her art of the God of Darkness meeting the Goddess of Light was represented beautifully in black and white. I had expected that the art would look great ever since I first saw the template, but it wasn't until I saw the art inked that I appreciated just how striking it was. The God of Darkness enveloping the Goddess of Light in his midnight cloak while she shined her light upon him created a beautiful contrast, and there were small, Wilma-like details such as wrinkles in clothes and curves in hair that I hadn't been able to see from the template alone.

"This is truly wonderful art." I turned to look at Wilma, and saw her staring at the printed illustration while shedding quiet tears. "Are you okay, Wilma?!"

"F-Forgive me. I am just ever so relieved, and, and, I do not even know what to say..." Wilma, stammering, wiped away her tears. The kids patted her back and tried to console her. To me, Wilma fighting to hold back tears of happiness as children consoled her was the very picture of a biblical painting. *Wilma really is a saint.*

Naturally, everyone in the workshop found themselves looking at Wilma as she wept with her cheeks tinted a rosy red. She soon noticed that everyone's eyes were on her, and immediately turned to leave the

workshop, her entire face bright red with embarrassment.

“Sister Myne, I-I will begin drawing the next illustration.”

After that, we resumed printing each time Wilma completed an illustration. The kids worked hard to make paper in the meantime, while the gray priests pounded out more ink. They also went to the forest to gather fruits and mushrooms to dry and went to buy firewood for winter.

“Myne, that’s the last of the printing done. What’s up next?” asked Lutz on our way home one day, the sharp chill in the air making it impossible to forget how deep into autumn we were. It seemed that they had finally finished printing all the pages for the bibles. That meant it was time for bookbinding, where the pages would finally be turned into actual books.

“Next up is (bookbinding)! I’m definitely going to the workshop tomorrow!”

“Do you have to? It’d be a lot easier if you just explained what to do.” It seemed that the gray priests found it harder to work with an apprentice blue shrine maiden like me watching. But I couldn’t contain my desire to be directly involved with the bookbinding. Especially since this would all be new to them.

“I want to be there for the first time at least so I can watch and participate. Once I’m sure things are going smoothly, I won’t get in the way again, just like I didn’t watch over the printing every time. Please, Lutz? Pretty please?”

“...Just the first time, alright?”

“Ahaha. Yaaay! Books, books!” I started to spin around in place, so Lutz started walking off while pulling me behind him. Once I started following him with a smile on my face, Lutz let go of my hand and took his diptych out from his bag.

“Alright, explain. You said it was, uh... bookbinding?”

“Yup! Bookbinding turns the pages into a book. Once the printed pages have all completely dried, we’ll fold them in half. A clean fold down the middle that leaves the art on one side and the text on the other. This will need tables, so maybe it would be better to do this in the orphanage’s dining hall.” I explained step by step while watching Lutz write it all down.

“Once a page is folded, start stacking them on top of each other, all of them facing the exact same direction. No matter what, don’t let different pages get mixed in or mess up the orientation. Oh, and right, use a precision knife to slice the page with the title and publication information in half.”

Next afternoon, stacks of printed paper were brought to the

orphanage dining hall while I watched. Each table was polished to a shine so as to not get any filth on the pages. I couldn't help but let out a sigh of bliss at the sight of the stacks of paper, in which the different sets of pages were distinguished by being angled horizontally then vertically and so on. The smell of new paper and ink was like a dream. I was so happy that I wanted to start dancing right then and there.

"Now then, please summon the squad leaders." The workshop workers were split into groups to make their jobs easier. Each squad would be folding different sets of pages. The gray priests were squad leaders and watched over the apprentices. Gil advised me that the kids too young to even be apprentices probably wouldn't be able to fold paper properly, so they were off making soup with Wilma.

"Take care that the edges match perfectly. Take care to fold in the proper direction. Take care to inform me when all pages from a set are completed." Once Lutz finished reading off his list of warnings, the squads began folding their paper.

"Please match the edges more carefully. Start by holding the paper here, then fold like so..." I gracefully walked between the tables while instructing them on how to fold properly. Paper was expensive and had just recently been introduced into the city, so none of them had ever folded any before. Not even the adult gray priests were capable of matching the edges perfectly at the start. It was like watching a clumsy foreigner attempting origami for the first time.

Noooo! My precious books! The pages are going to end up all slanted! Cradling my head at the horrible yet undeniable reality, I stealthily whispered to Lutz.

"Lutz, can I fold some of it myself?"

"Not right now. You've gotta sit back and watch."

AAAAAH! I should have had them practice with ripped paper first!

As I watched on, anxious as to just how the books would look in the end, the poorly folded pages piled on. I checked each and sent back any that were just unreasonably bad. Making books with paper that poorly folded was out of the question. Other people might forgive books with horribly slanted pages, but I had higher standards for my own work.

Once all the papers were folded, I had them line the tables up next to each other. By going down the line of tables, one would assemble the pages of the book in order. I had gone through the same process when making little guidebooks back in my Urano days, so it wasn't new to me. It was the first time for everyone working here, though.

"First, take the title page. Then move down the table and take one sheet of paper from the next pile, which you put on top of the title page. Then go further down the table, and so on. Take care not to flip the pages or take more than one from the pile," I explained while

speedily grabbing pages for myself. It would be nice if we had staplers to staple the pages together, but this world didn't have anything so convenient.

I returned to my seat with a full set of paper, and Fran welcomed me back by sighing "Sister Myne..." with a weary expression. I understood that he wanted to tell me not to get directly involved, but I averted eye contact and didn't let it get to me. I needed these pages so I could make an example and secure a set for myself.

"I will be bringing these home with me. My apologies for acting selfish." As everyone else gathered sets of paper, I refolded the pages delicately while fixing the creases with my nails. The paper was so thick that I should have prepared rulers or something of the sort ahead of time. Though thinking of how difficult it would be to fix a solid ruler fold, maybe I had been wise not to.

As there were only enough pages for thirty books, the books were assembled quickly and stacked into three stacks of ten books each, with each book's worth of paper shifted ninety degrees to prevent overlap. They then carefully carried the stacks back to the workshop.

"We will need further tools to continue, so that will be all for today. Thank you for your work, everyone." I put my pages into my bag and left as soon as I could to continue my bookbinding.

Lutz got a piece of flower paper from the workshop and brought it to me. "I can help if you're gonna keep going at home. Seeing you work's a lot easier than just listening to instructions."

There was no kind of glue for me to use to stick the pages together since we hadn't made hide glue yet. For that reason, I wanted to bind the book using a four-hole stitch, which was the most fundamental form of classical Japanese bookbinding.

"I'm home!"

"Hi, Myne. You're back early. Oh, hi Lutz!" When I got home, Tuuli was already back from the forest. I took out my bag and immediately showed her the bundle of pages I had brought back to bind together.

"Check it out, Tuuli. A children's bible! I finally printed one."

"Woow! These pictures are way prettier!" Tuuli let out an excited cry while flipping through the pages. It seemed she didn't understand the true beauty of the black-and-white pictures I had drawn myself. I pursed my lips a little.

"...But the pages are kinda all over the place. Won't this be hard to read?"

"I'm about to bind it into a proper book. Oh, and would you mind helping? It'd be nice if you went to the workshop to help teach the kids there too. I'm not allowed to do work there." I took out the

flower paper meant for the cover from my bag and set it on the table while Tuuli tilted her head a bit in confusion.

“I don’t mind helping, but what can I even do?”

“I want to sew the pages together with a thread and needle, so you’ll probably be better at it than me.”

“Oh, okay. But... give me a book for helping, please. I want to learn to read too,” asked Tuuli, looking a little embarrassed.

It seemed that Tuuli started wanting to learn to read after seeing Lutz and me writing on our diptychs and slates, plus Corinna writing notes while taking orders. Of course, I was more than glad to give her a book. I would even be her personal tutor if she wanted me to.

“We can read this book together, since I’ll be leaving this one at home. I’ll lend you my slate, too. I may be bad at sewing, but I can teach you to read. I was planning on teaching the orphanage kids to read over the winter, so why don’t you join in? You learn faster when you have someone to compete against.”

I searched through Dad’s toolset to find what I needed for bookbinding, then lined up the tools on the table. All in all I took out a ruler, a hammer, a board, and an awl.

“First, make sure the edges are lined up perfectly. This is the last chance you have to fix them. Once that’s done, use a ruler or something similar to tighten the fold. Like this.” I ran the ruler over the fold to demonstrate, then Lutz and Tuuli did the same with their stacks of paper.

“Once the fold is good, double check the sides, then take the spine, and, ummm... tap the paper against the table so they all line up, then open inner binding holes, which are used for binding the inner part of the book without the cover.”

After gathering the paper together on top of the board, I used a ruler to measure it and mark three holes on it with a soot pen.

“Lutz, I want you to open holes on these dots. Just hold the awl directly above them, then hit it with a hammer.” I held down the edges while Lutz hit the awl down onto the marked spots.

“Tuuli, could you run a string through the needle, then run the needle through the middle hole from the front?”

Even putting needles through holes was beyond my level of dexterity, but Tuuli was used to this kind of work. She prepared the needle and thread in no time, then got the needle through the hole easily.

“Then pass it through the top hole from behind, and then go through the bottom hole from the front. Then go from the back of the bottom hole through the middle hole.”

I had Tuuli cut the thread once that was done so I could tie the top and bottom ends of the string together such that they sandwiched

the string that passed from the top hole to the bottom hole. I then had Tuuli once again cut the ends of the string, then had Lutz hit the knot with the hammer. “Crushing the knot here makes the front cover look prettier.”

Once the hammering was done, Lutz wrote the steps down onto his diptych. I used that time to press the ruler against the edges of the book and find bits sticking out, which I cut off with a precision knife.

“Normally I’d make corner covers for it, but that needs glue, so we’re skipping straight to putting on the cover. For that we’re using the pretty paper with flowers in it.” I folded the paper filled with tiny flowers and plants while Tuuli peered over my shoulder.

“Wow, that’s cute!”

“Right? We’re cutting it in half too, since half goes on the front and half goes on the back. Then we’re going to position the ruler where the outer binding holes will be, and use the awl to scratch out a little line. Once that’s done, we’ll put dots on the front cover and poke open holes like we did with the inner binding holes.”

I lined up the ruler and, rather than risk dirtying the front cover with soot, pushed with the awl to make four indents on the front cover—not three. It was a little sad that I wasn’t strong enough to just poke open holes myself.

“Alright, my turn.” Lutz held up the hammer and poked open the holes. Given that Tuuli started threading the needle, she had guessed what she would be doing next.

“Put the needle through the second hole’s back, then loop around the spine to go through the second hole’s back again... Right. Leave about as much thread as your pointer finger, then open the book, drag the rest of the thread inside, and push it between the pages so you can’t see them anymore.”

“Like this?”

“Push them a bit more with the needle. Right, like that. Once you’re done with that, push the needle through the front of the third hole, then loop around and do it again.”

The next step was to push it through the back of the fourth hole, loop around, then do it again. Then go around the spine of the book before going through the fourth hole again. Then go back to the top from the bottom and fill in any spots where the thread hasn’t been.

“This is actually kinda simple,” murmured Tuuli while sliding the needle around. It was basically just going through the open parts of the holes one by one, so the sewing itself wasn’t hard as long as you didn’t lose track of where you were. All you had to do was keep the thread taut.

“Once you’ve sewn up to the top, put the back cover on top and take care of the thread. Just pass the needle through here and the

thread will connect.”

“Wow, it actually did.” She moved the needle at my instructions and voiced her surprise at the resulting knot.

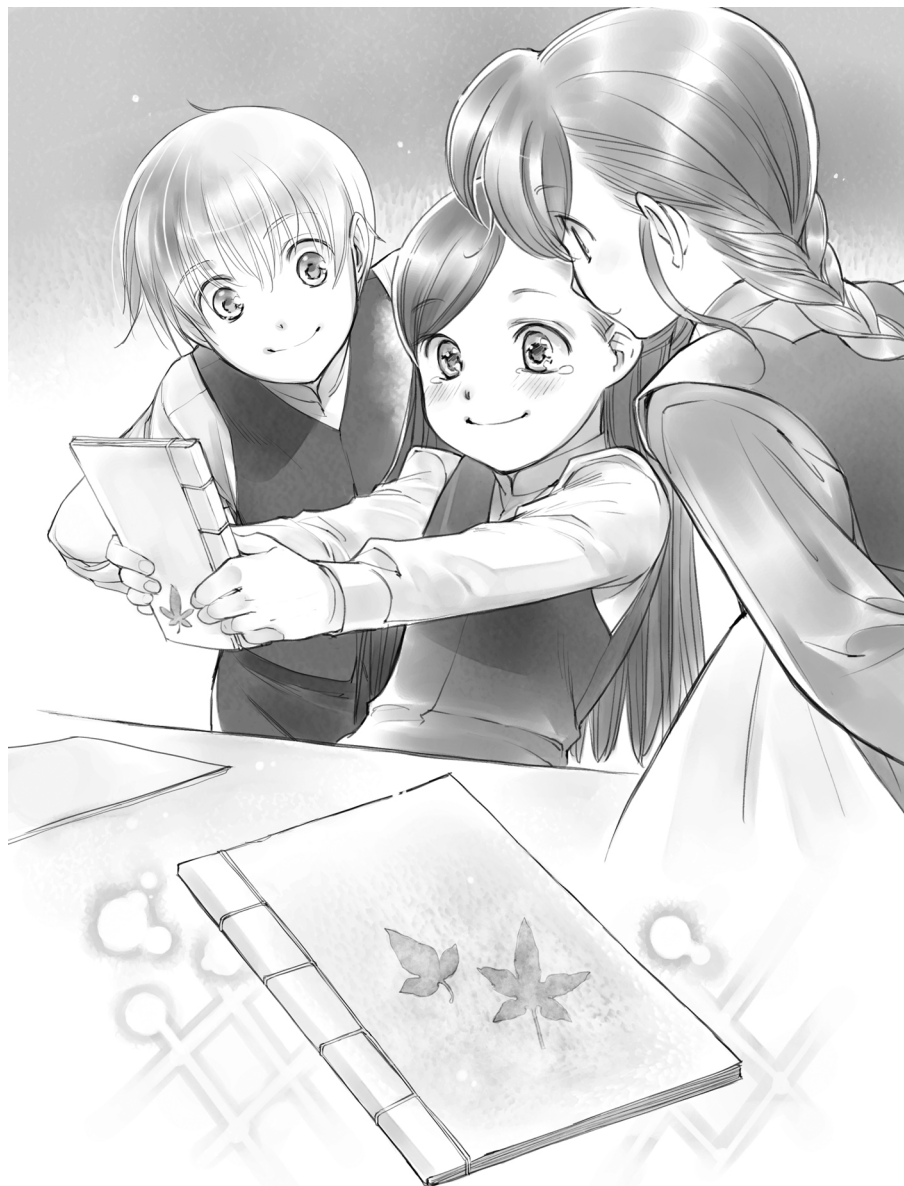
“Pull this thread hard to tighten it, then pass the needle through the second hole to get the knot there. It’ll stay together easier that way.”

“Woah, that’s awesome!” Lutz watched as Tuuli tightened the thread and tried dropping the knot into the hole. It wasn’t really getting in, so she used the needle to push it in before tightening the thread again.

“Now just cut the thread, and... the book will be... the book will be finished.” I felt my chest heating up as I prepared to witness the completion of my first book. My whole body tightened up like it was being squeezed and my throat itched. My eyes watered and distorted my view of the not-yet-complete book.

“Here, Myne. You cut it,” said Lutz while handing me a thread cutter. Tuuli nodded and lifted the needle above the book, making the leftover thread taut beneath it. I took the cutter with shaking hands and positioned the thread between its short blades. A tiny squeeze was all it took to cut the thread.

As soon as the thread fell, I felt my tear ducts burst. Hot tears I had no hope of containing trickled down my cheeks one after another.



“We made it... We made it, Lutz.”

Not a clay tablet, not a mokkan, not a notepad of cobbled-together paper, not a blank picture book with no words on it. I had made an actual book, one that I could proudly call a book with no hesitation.

“...It took so long. So, so long.”

About two years had passed since I had vowed to make my own book. And finally, I had finished one. It felt like a dream. Lutz, who had been with me the entire time helping, was smiling ear to ear with wet eyes full of accomplishment.

“We did it, Myne.” Lutz spread out his arms for me, so I hugged him tight and nodded repeatedly. I wouldn’t have been able to do anything on my own. It was thanks to Lutz’s help that I managed to finish this book.

“It’s all thanks to you and Tuuli. Thank you. I’m so, so happy. I can hardly say how happy I am. I’ve finally made a book. My own book, that I’ve wanted for so long...”

Unable to wipe away my tears for fear of getting the book dirty with stained hands, I just kept staring at the newly finished book. It was a thin picture book with primitive Japanese binding, but thinking back on the journey it took to get to this point, I couldn’t help but cry. I started with nothing. No stamina, no strength, no money, no paper, no ink, no tools. But I challenged the world anyway, and my work finally bore fruit.

As I welled in the bliss of finishing a book, Lutz shot me a challenging grin. “But that’s still just one book. You’re gonna make a lot more, right? You want to make so many books that you could read all day every day and never finish all of them. Am I right, Myne?”

Lutz’s jade eyes were already set on his next target. He had to keep conquering challenge after challenge to keep up with his ambition. I finally wiped away my tears and smiled back at him.

“That’s right. I’m going to make so many books we’ll need a library. That’s a promise.”

Missing the Harvest Festival

Tuuli went to the workshop to teach everyone how to bind books. I wanted to go and help, but Lutz shot me down—I would just be getting in the way. No arguing with that.

“Fran, is there anything that demands my attention before we go to the book room today?”

“Not at all.”

Fran and Rosina were in the process of recording how much food the orphanage went through in a month and calculating how much would be needed for the winter. Meat and harvested crops from farming towns would soon be transported into the city as everyone began their winter preparations. We would need to have at least a rough estimation of how much we needed before then. This was the first time the orphanage would ever be doing their own winter preparations.

“I can visit the book room with Rosina if you are too busy to go yourself.”

“It is fine, I was going to send Rosina to work with Wilma. And I can accompany you regardless of how busy I am, given that I can bring my documents to the book room.” Once Fran packed a bag with a ton of boards and ink, we headed to the book room together. Bright sunlight that still had a trace of summer’s warmth streamed into the chilly hall.

As we walked I could see the exit leading to the Noble’s Quarter from the hall, and there seemed to be several carriages lined up. Judging by all the luggage packed into them, some blue priests were probably heading out.

“...Might I ask why those carriages are lined up? Has something happened?”

“Those are the carriages for blue priests heading to the Harvest Festival. Generally, blue priests go to the Harvest Festival around this time of year.”

“Harvest Festival...? I have not heard of this festival before.”

Autumn was the season of preparing for winter by gathering more in the forest while harvests from farming towns entered the market. I knew that there were tiny festivals in neighborhoods where everyone went off to butcher pigs together, but I had never heard of a Harvest Festival.

“Is it a special festival for the temple? I don’t recall learning about it.” Fran and the High Priest had taught me some of the rituals performed in the temple, and the Harvest Festival certainly wasn’t one of them.

“Oh? Do commoners not know of it?” A sudden voice rang out from behind.

I jerked in surprise and turned around to see a noble-looking man looking down at me with mocking eyes. He wasn’t the blue priest I had met at the Star Festival, but since he wasn’t wearing any blue robes, I couldn’t tell if he was a blue priest or a noble that was visiting the temple on business.

I immediately moved to a wall and knelt with my arms crossed in front of my chest. That was a sign of respect that those of lower status performed for those above them. I had been told I only needed to perform it for the High Bishop and High Priest since all blue robes were equal, but I was still a commoner. I would rather play it safe and be respectful than get wrapped up in a fight after treating a noble as my equal.

“Hm, looks like you do know your place. The High Priest told the truth after all. I suppose I didn’t need to get involved, then.” The noble, satisfied with how I had immediately knelt before him, walked off with a few comments that left me a little curious.

But anyway. It seemed I had managed to avoid trouble. Given that he said I “knew my place,” he was probably a blue priest. A normal noble would probably view any priest kneeling to them as normal.

“Sister Myne, you are his equal here. You needn’t kneel.”

“Technically yes, but I am no noble. His status is still overwhelmingly superior to mine. If I can avoid trouble just by kneeling, I see no reason not to.”

Despite my reasoning, Fran still lowered his eyes with a look of vexation. “But if you do that, the other blue priests will look down on you, Sister Myne.”

“I would expect nothing less. I am a commoner, after all. Would you prefer for me to earn their ire and put the orphanage in danger?”

Given that the blue priests knew I had earned my position through overpowering the High Bishop with violence, they probably wouldn’t attack me head-on. But as I was the orphanage director, it was very possible that they would try to exploit the orphans to hurt me.

“I understand your reasoning,” replied Fran, “but I believe that it is important for you to show firm noble pride.” He then resumed walking to the book room, looking discontented.

But how could he expect me to have “firm noble pride”? If Fran wanted to serve a master that oozed confidence with a firm backbone, well, I could try, but it wasn’t so simple to just up and learn to carry

yourself with majestic grace.

“Allow me, Sister Myne,” said Fran as he opened the door. But the second I stepped inside, I felt my expression freeze over.

“...What the heck?!”

The book room was an absolute mess. Two of the bookshelves were completely empty, their contents scattered on the floor, which was such a mess of boards and scrolls that there was nowhere to step. This was clearly a level beyond someone dropping something by accident. Someone had intentionally knocked over everything on the shelves.

I felt anger start boiling inside my chest. The book room existing at all was a miracle in this world that barely had any books or even things with words written on them.

And yet, they had defiled it. Damaged it. I would need to smash those fools who didn't understand the value of these documents with the iron hammer of justice.

“Ahahahahaha. Just who would be foolish enough to do this, I wonder?”

Mana boiled throughout my body and I encouraged it. *Go ahead. Catch the villain who did this and splatter the halls with their blood.*

“S-Sister Myne! We must first report this to the High Priest. He will instruct us on what to do next. It might have been the last person to enter the book room,” said Fran in a panicked voice as he grabbed onto my shoulders from behind.

The sight of him trying to avoid being hit with my mana head-on was enough to cool my head. I was finally learning to control my mana better. Nothing good would come from scaring Fran and hurting those uninvolved. I could save my anger and mana rampage for when I found the culprit. With a smile, I forced the mana back into its box.

“You're right. Let us visit the High Priest.”

As we hadn't scheduled a meeting, I waited in the visitor's room while Fran requested an audience. I could hear people moving around the halls as I sat quietly. They were probably the blue priests preparing to leave. The second I thought that, I remembered what the blue priest I just met had said. *“I suppose I didn't need to get involved,”* if I remembered correctly.

...It was him! I immediately stood up. I couldn't just sit around now that I knew the culprit. He was getting ready to leave on some kind of trip. I had to catch him before he could get away.

I grabbed the doorknob just as someone opened it from behind. The door swung in my direction out of nowhere and I fell backwards hard, swung back by the door.

“Bwuh?!”

“Sister Myne?! What were you doing there...?” Fran held out his

hand, looking stunned, and I pulled myself up with it. Once on my feet I immediately tried running out of the room, only to be hurriedly grabbed from behind by Fran.

“What is wrong, Sister Myne?”

“I figured out who messed up the book room. If we hurry, we can still catch them in time! Let go of me!”

“Please discuss that with the High Priest. He is waiting for you.” Fran hoisted me up into the air, murmuring that I would run off the second he let go of me. He then walked to the High Priest’s room without listening to my protests.

Upon seeing Fran carry me into his room, the High Priest raised an eyebrow. “What happened?”

“Sister Myne attempted to run to the carriages after intuiting the culprit, so I had no choice but to carry her.”

“Understandable. That was a very wise decision.” The High Priest praised Fran and, after gesturing for him to set me down, jutted his chin at the hidden room. At this point, it would be better to call it the “lecture room” than the “hidden room.”

I followed the High Priest into the room while feeling a bit depressed about what awaited me. I moved aside documents and sat on the bench like usual, and the High Priest likewise brought over his chair like usual. He looked at me while rubbing his temples a little.

“I heard from Fran that the book room was vandalized.”

“That’s right. Two of the bookshelves were completely cleaned out. All the documents were spread on the floor, so much so that you couldn’t even step anywhere. Is this not a crime worthy of death?!”

Despite the desperation of my plea, the High Priest shot me down with a wave of his hand. “Don’t be ridiculous. It is not worth the death penalty. But in any case, Fran said you intuited the culprit?”

“Yes. I met a blue priest preparing to leave the temple on my way to the book room, and he said ‘I didn’t need to get involved.’ It was definitely him.”

“I see, but there are five blue priests departing for the Harvest Festival today. Which of them was it?” There had been a lot of carriages, but I hadn’t thought that there would be five whole blue priests leaving.

“I don’t know. But I know his face.”

“They will likely return from the festival in ten days. Will you remember him for that long?” asked the High Priest doubtfully. I nodded hard.

“I will never forget the face of he who attacked my books. Ever.”

“It would be better for me if you did.” The High Priest glared at me with a sigh, but I wasn’t about to let a criminal of this magnitude just get off scot-free. I went ahead and changed the subject.

“By the way, what is the Harvest Festival? I don’t believe you explained it when summarizing all the temple rituals.”

“Indeed, because you will not be participating. The Harvest Festival is held throughout farming villages in a region, and was originally...” The High Priest began explaining the Harvest Festival. To briefly summarize his explanation, it was an event where taxmen and blue priests traveled to farming towns to snatch part of their harvest.

“The farming towns must hate the festival if their crops are taken as religious offerings and taxes.”

“Do not put it so bluntly. And furthermore, they perform religious rituals at the towns.” The High Priest glared at me with a cough. It seemed I should have framed my observation more positively. As always, mastery of the nobility’s roundabout way of speaking eluded me.

“Are those rituals held in the autumn too?”

“They are held after the harvest.”

Ah, I see. Farmers generally had no spare time from the moment the snow melted to the day they finished harvesting their crops. They probably had more free time than they knew what to do with once they were locked up for the winter, but no priest would want to wade through blizzards to hold any rituals. It kind of sucked that the rituals were performed right after taxes were taken, but it did make sense.

“Not to mention that if a couple does not participate in the Starbind Ceremony, they will not be recognized as husband and wife in the winter building, and they will not be given a home or fields when spring comes.”

“What’s a winter building?”

“The building where farmers spend the winter. Life in farming towns is very different from life in the city. During the summer they live in individual homes located at the center of their fields, but as they cannot farm during the winter, they pass time in a large building located within the center of town. I do not know much more about that myself, though.”

It seemed that living in a farming town was entirely unlike living in the city. I couldn’t really picture their lifestyle from the explanation given, but if even the High Priest didn’t know the details, I probably didn’t need to go out of my way to learn more.

“...I don’t participate in the Harvest Festival?”

“Correct. There is a meeting held to decide who is sent where, and the High Bishop threw quite a fuss about not sending you anywhere so you would not dig into his cut.”

I couldn’t help but smile at how obsessively antagonistic the High Bishop was towards me. My days were so busy that I was on the verge of forgetting about him, but he seemed as mad at me as ever. The

other blue priests viewed the festival as a valuable chance to boost their income, so they agreed with the High Bishop.

“Some farming towns are also far away, and it would weigh on your body to make such a long journey. The Spring Prayer will need your mana, but I saw no need to send you out for the Harvest Festival.”

Something about the High Priest’s explanation caught me, and I reflectively tilted my head. “...Does that mean I’ll be going to farming towns once spring comes?”

“Yes. You and I will likely be selected, given our high quantities of mana.” I knew that there was a Spring Prayer held to wish for a bountiful harvest, but I didn’t know that it was held in farming towns.

“I don’t think I would survive a long trip by carriage!”

“I know it will be difficult. But this job is of vital importance. We accepted your conditions for joining the temple largely because rituals such as these require mana. Have you forgotten that?”

The temple accepted me as an apprentice blue shrine maiden specifically because they were experiencing a huge mana shortage. Given that they were letting me read books and even make them in the Myne Workshop, I couldn’t abandon my duty when it finally came time to pay them back.

“...I haven’t forgotten.”

“Good. It won’t be easy for you, but please remember the suffering I will endure while accompanying you as your guardian and supervisor.”

...Do you have really bad luck, High Priest? Or are you just the kind of person that cares so much they make life hard on themselves? I swallowed down the observation that nearly slipped out of my mouth and shut my lips tight. Saying something like that would just be poking the hornet’s nest.

“Still, I would rather go myself than risk entrusting it to another blue priest.”

“Thank you for your consideration.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest and bowed my head a bit.

“...So. What do you intend to do about the book room?” asked the High Priest, leading me to grin and clench my fist.

“Naturally, I will be hosting a (bloody carnival).”

“What in the world is that?”

“A festival of blood where the criminal is publicly executed. As they have made a clear declaration of war by vandalizing the book room, we will need to parade their head on a stick to restore the morale of our allies.”

The blue priest I didn’t know the name of had given the most explosive declaration of war possible. If Fran wanted me to be firm

and prideful, well, this was the perfect opportunity to show my backbone.

"I will not have it! The blue priest only vandalized the book room so that you would be too distracted to go to the Harvest Festival! He did not destroy any documents, and attempting to hold a festival of blood or what have you is nothing but dangerous extremism!"

I personally thought that my proposed punishment was equal to the crime. Too bad the High Priest and I didn't see eye to eye here. "...All that, just to stop me from going to the Harvest Festival? After they agreed not to send me in the meeting anyway?"

"Yes, I would assume so. The documents there were organized by the date of their revival, and with no markings otherwise they assumed you would be unable to clean up properly. Not that I remember every document stored there myself."

The second I heard the High Priest say "unable to clean up properly," a switch flipped in my head. The blue priest had declared war on me in the form of a personal challenge. I wasn't about to let someone think that I couldn't clean up the book room.

"...I accept his challenge."

"What are you talking about?"

"I will clean up the book room's documents myself. But as I do not know when each document was made, please be aware that I will organize them in my own style." Thinking about it, this was a perfect opportunity for me. It would be my best chance to turn the book room into a paradise designed specifically for me.

...Far be it from me to miss this opportunity to introduce a classification system to the book room. I'd organize the scrolls and boards by type, write up a catalog of everything there, and introduce order to the chaos. All to make the book room easier for me to use. And after all, the book room was in such a bad state that nobody else would want to clean it up. I could do whatever I wanted in there. Honestly, I kinda owed the culprit my thanks.

"Would it not be unfair to force someone else to clean up when the destruction was caused due to me? And I believe I use the book room more than anyone else."

"I find your sudden excitement to be off-putting, but it is hard to imagine that you will treat the documents poorly. Very well. I will leave cleaning up the book room to you."

We returned to the High Priest's room, and once there I made eye contact with Fran. He looked worried that I might have gone ballistic over the book room. But seeing him made me realize something: I was too short to reach the shelves, and even with my attendants to help, Gil and Delia were too short as well. Fran would be stuck doing everything himself.

“High Priest, might I recruit gray priests from the orphanage to help clean the book room? Also, is there a catalog of sorts for the book room? It would help to know what kinds of documents are stored here.”

“Hm. That would be too much work for Fran, so certainly. I have a list of the books I brought myself, but that is all. If such a catalog exists at all, the High Bishop must have it.” A list of books would definitely help classify them. I looked up at the High Priest with hope.

“May I borrow it?”

“Certainly,” said the High Priest, and Arno speedily took out two wooden boards which he then handed to me. He was as skilled of an attendant as ever.

“Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I left the room, and once we were in the hall, Fran timidly spoke with confusion written on his face.

“...Sister Myne, you seem to be somewhat pleased.”

“Ahaha, that’s because I am. So much so that I want to thank the culprit and the gods at once.”

“May I ask why?”

“I now have the opportunity to organize the book room however I like. Can you imagine anything more exciting than that, Fran? I can’t.”

I had just finished reading the chained books and was thinking about moving on to the document-stuffed bookshelves. One could say that organizing them as I liked would be killing two birds with one stone.

I finally get to act like a librarian, kinda! Heck yeah! Let’s do it!

The Myne Decimal System

“Fran, please go to the workshop and squire three gray priests, then summon all of my attendants except Wilma.”

“What will you be doing, Sister Myne?”

“I will look over the list the High Priest gave me and think about how to classify the books.”

Upon entering the book room, Fran cleared a path to a desk. He sat me down, placed the two boards the High Priest lent us in front of me, and then speedily left to acquire our help.

After seeing him off, I began looking over the list by myself. The list was written with small and compact letters that made it clear that the writer only cared if he could read them, not anybody else.

“Let’s see here. The High Priest brought... woah, what?! There’s so many!” The High Priest had brought an enormous number of books with him—half of the chained books and more documents than could fit on a shelf in one of the bookshelves.

“...Just who is the High Priest?!” All I knew for sure was that he was staggeringly rich. He said in the past that he entered the temple due to certain circumstances, but I could imagine his family was definitely on the higher echelon of status. If not for that, he couldn’t have brought five books with him into the temple when each was worth multiple large gold coins.

As far as I knew, books with hard leather covers, gold decoration, and gemstones fit into them weren’t normally something that someone just owned. They were family treasures and the like. Yet the High Priest had brought five of them into the temple as his personal belongings, and had opened them up for anyone in the temple to read them. That alone was enough to make my opinion of the High Priest shoot up sky-high.

“He’s such a good person... I don’t think many others would do this.”

My plan was to first roughly categorize the books on the list and then organize the shelves based on how many documents of each category existed, but I hit a sudden wall.

“...How should I classify books related to magic?” Unfortunately, the Japanese version of the Dewey Decimal System didn’t have a section for magic. But the High Priest had more documents related to magic than any other, maybe due to it being a field that only nobles

were involved in or maybe because they needed it for research.

I tried writing out the categories used in the Japanese classification system.

0 — General Works

1 — Philosophy

2 — History

3 — Social Sciences

4 — Natural Sciences

5 — Technology

6 — Industry

7 — Art

8 — Language

9 — Literature

Considering that magic involved making magic tools, it would probably fall under technology. Or maybe it would be better to treat it like math or a natural science. It was hard to introduce a decimal system into a world where life was so different.

“Anyway, I’ll think about it after taking a closer look at the documents. I’m sure it’ll be more clear once I see what they’re like.” I couldn’t help but smile as I looked at all the documents scattered on the floor. *’Cause I mean, this is magic we’re talking about. How could my heart not beat fast at the mere thought of what’s written in these scrolls?*

Everything outside of magic could be classified normally, so once everyone got here we would stack the documents first to clear up the floor. I would then mark the shelves with classifications and scan each document individually, putting it on whichever shelf that seemed to fit it the best. Ideally I would finish that by the end of today, which would let me spend the following days recording them in a catalog and creating more precise classification numbers. The second level of classification would probably need to be modified significantly to be usable here.

“Geez! Just what happened here?!” I heard a familiar shout and turned to see Delia in the doorway, her eyes flared open with anger. It was her job to keep my room clean, so naturally a mess like this would set her off. Behind her stood my other attendants and three gray priests, all of whom looked stunned at the state of the book room.

“Holy cow,” murmured Gil. “I dunno who did this, but I guess they want Sister Myne to kill’m...” Gil knew how much I loved books, and his observation made Fran press a hand against his stomach.

“What’s wrong, Fran? Does your stomach hurt?”

“...Somewhat, when I think of the culprit’s future.” I didn’t expect Fran to be so worried about the culprit that he would feel ill. I put a hand on my cheek and tilted my head.

“Perhaps I should cancel the blood festival, then. I thought it would be a perfect opportunity to show my firm backbone as a master and raise the morale of my allies, but if you insist...”

“Wh-Wha, Sister Myne! A blood festival’s not gonna pump anyone up! You’re just gonna scare everyone!” My attendants and the gray priests behind them all paled and collectively took a fearful step back. Only Fran walked up to me, knelt, and took both my hands to begin his plea.

“I beg of you, please cancel it. You have already shown the firmness of your backbone, Sister Myne.”

“You think so? In that case, I will cancel the blood festival. We can focus on cleaning up today.” Fran begged me to stop with such a serious look I decided to cancel it after all. Cleaning up the book room would be a lot more fun than a blood festival anyway.

“First of all, take care not to step on any documents. Separate the parchment documents from the board documents and stack them on this desk. Begin by picking them up in a way that forms a path to the bookshelves.”

They all replied “Understood,” to which I nodded and continued my explanation. “Fran and I will organize the gathered documents. Please line them up on the shelf according to the classification given. The top shelf of the left bookshelf will be 0, the second shelf 1, and the bottom will be kept open. The right bookshelf’s two top shelves will be 2 and the bottom one will be 3. The documents outside of those classifications will be organized last. You can line the documents up in any order you like, just be sure not to mix up their classification numbers.”

Fran sat next to me as the others went off to pick up the documents on the floor. He blinked in confusion, having been given a different job from everyone else.

“Sister Myne, what exactly is this classification system?”

“Behold! This is the Myne Decimal System chart. Take a look at this and decide which document matches which number. You can ask me if you’re not sure, I’ll help.” I handed my diptych to Fran while explaining how it worked. Meanwhile, parchment and boards were stacked on the desk. Fran and I looked over them and organized them according to the most basic level of classification they fit into.

“Rosina, once a path is made to the left bookshelf, please place these documents on Shelf 1.”

“Understood, Sister Myne.”

I had expected this, but many of the church documents were about philosophy. There were also a lot about history and the social sciences. My eyes were particularly drawn to documents listing the total harvests of farming towns, along with how much of the harvest

was taken by the church. But they were all old and I couldn't find anything more recent. Furthermore, I could find no documents about language or literature. Not a single one.

"Delia," cried out Rosina, "there is parchment within that scroll! Be careful."

"Geez! Don't get in the way of my rolling, stupid parchment!!" Delia shouted at the parchment while unrolling the scroll, partially out of embarrassment. Rosina giggled and picked up the pieces of parchment that ended up scattered across the ground. All scrolls were put in the same location, so we weren't classifying them despite looking at their contents. We could finally see the floor again once the scrolls were picked up.

"Gil, please give these documents to the priest near Shelf 2." The documents that had been scattered on the floor weren't books and had no uniform size. I saw a gray priest fighting with a piece of parchment that kept falling over and concluded that it would be nice to have a filing cabinet or some such for everyone. We didn't even have any bookends.

"...Maybe I should ask Johann to make some."

"Sister Myne?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Rosina, please give these boards to that gray priest. Tell him that he can push the parchment back with them."

The book room still looked like a mess, but the valuable books within the locked shelf that could only be opened with a key from the High Bishop or High Priest had been untouched, and the chained books hadn't been damaged or even scratched. The blue priest that did this really had just scattered the documents out of petty spite. The two empty bookshelves and the covered floor made it seem as if a huge number of documents had been scattered, but once the scrolls were rolled up and the documents stacked, there weren't really that many of them. Fran and I didn't have many boards and pieces of parchment to categorize.

"...I guess that's it?"

We finished organizing all the parchment and boards so fast I couldn't help but tilt my head in surprise.

"Yes," confirmed Fran. "That did not take as long as I expected. Your classification system was very efficient."

"We just organized them based on the first level of classification. I intend to make more precise subdivisions to make specific documents easier to find. It will certainly be difficult to devise precision classification numbers for these documents, but it will be worth doing."

Fran stood up, smiling in relief, so I stood up as well and looked around. All the documents that had been on the floor were now stored

on shelves. But the shelves I had reserved for the High Priest's documents were both empty. I hadn't found a single one of his documents pertaining to magic despite everything having been picked up.

"Sister Myne, is something wrong?" Fran's voice snapped me back to reality and I saw the gray priests lined up by my attendants, awaiting further orders. It seemed they couldn't leave until I told them to, even though their work here was done.

"The book room has been cleaned up thanks to your efforts. Thank you all ever so much. I greatly appreciate your assistance."

Fran had to go return the book room's key to the High Priest, so I followed. I wanted to ask him about the magic documents.

"I need to return the list he gave me, and I have a question to ask him."

"What might that question be?"

"I couldn't find any of the documents recorded on the list. Maybe they're stored elsewhere, but if not, this could be a big deal."

Fran paled. If all documents related to magic had been stolen by someone, I would be treated with the most suspicion given that I cleaned up the book room. The fact that none of the valuable books had been stolen made me think the documents were probably fine, but better safe than sorry.

"I would rather not see your face more than once a day, you know." The High Priest gave a blatant grimace the second I entered his room. *It's not like I'm coming here to see you either*, I protested on the inside while thanking him for the list with a smile.

"High Priest, thank you for lending me the list."

"You finished organizing the book room? That was faster than I expected," murmured the High Priest. But what did he expect? No way would I let precious documents rot on the floor.

"I finished the first tier of classification. I will begin work on the second and third tiers in the coming days. By the way, I couldn't find the documents on your list. If you're storing them somewhere yourself, that's fine, but I thought I should report this just in case they were lost or stolen."

"That is to be expected, as those documents are in my room. But more importantly, Myne, how did you know that only the documents listed here were missing out of that mountain of documents?"

"I prepared a classification number for them, but the shelf for them ended up being empty." We were talking about real documents about magic, unlike anything I had seen before in my Urano days. Anyone excited about magic would notice that they weren't there. Not to mention, the High Priest said there was a "mountain of documents" in the book room, but I was so used to Earth libraries that the book

room seemed downright sparse to me.

“What do you mean by classification number?”

“Those are part of the Myne Decimal System. They’re used to organize books and documents.” I took out my diptych, which still had the chart I drew to show Fran. “I wasn’t sure if I should classify the magic documents under technology or under natural science, and ultimately decided to wait until I had read them.”

“Oh...? This is quite an interesting system. Did you think of it yourself?” The High Priest narrowed his eyes, looking at me with suspicion. Honestly, his suspicion was justified. No way could I think up something as wonderful as this.

“No, I based this on the (Japanese) Decimal System, which was in turn based on the Dewey Decimal System created by Melvil Dewey. I call it the Myne Decimal System.”

“Melvil Dewey? Who is that, and where is he from? I’ve never heard of him.”

“He died a long time ago, and I’ve never even met him myself. But more importantly. What do you think magic should be classified under?”

I pointed at the diptych and asked the High Priest about what number to classify magic under. He actually took the question pretty seriously, and began thinking hard while muttering things like “The fundamental aspect of magic is...” and “No, but when it comes to magic tools, one cannot forget that...”

I eagerly waited for his answer, and after a bit of waiting the High Priest suddenly snapped back to reality. He coughed and shook his head. “I can only say that it depends on the document, and in any case, it is not something for you to worry about.”

“...Why not? I can’t organize them without giving them a classification number.” The High Priest slowly looked around the room, then placed the sound-blocking magic tool in front of me. I gripped it and waited for him to continue.

“Only nobles wield magic. As the blue priests here have not graduated from the Royal Academy, the documents are not for their eyes. I have no intention of storing them in the book room.”

In short, the documents piled up in his hidden room were no doubt focused on magic. That made sense, but also seemed strange. The High Priest had made it sound entirely as if blue priests weren’t nobles.

“Only nobles wield magic...? But aren’t blue priests nobles?”

“Not exactly, no. Blue priests have the blood of the nobility and possess mana. But only those who graduate from the Royal Academy are accepted as nobles within noble society.”

“What? But you said that a bunch of blue priests and shrine

maidens went back to noble society.” Maybe they were sent to the Royal Academy after being taken back. Though according to what I had heard about the gray priests in the orphanage, some of their former masters had been adult priests and shrine maidens.

“The Royal Academy temporarily allowed for them to be admitted due to how necessary it was to replace the enormous number of nobles killed during the purge. This allowed for the status quo to be maintained. Given the influence of their families, blue priests may appear identical to nobles despite not attending the Royal Academy, but that isn’t quite right.”

I had thought that anyone with noble blood would be a noble, based both on my historical knowledge of the nobility and on how the blue priests carried themselves. But since one had to graduate from the Royal Academy to be a noble, not all blue priests were real nobles.

“...You just can’t be a noble if you don’t graduate? That seems pretty harsh.”

“I would disagree. Nobles wield the enormous power of mana. One so ignorant that they cannot control their mana, use it properly, or make magic tools can hardly be considered a noble. It’s that simple. And it is for that reason that no matter how much you beg or plead, I cannot show you the documents. Nor would I want to. That is the end of this.” He finished his explanation that made it clear that he wouldn’t budge on the matter. It seemed that the High Priest knew all along that I had actually been hoping that he would show them to me.

“High Priiist...”

“My answer will not change. Return to your chambers at once,” he ordered with an ice-cold glare. I slumped my shoulders and left the room.

...Tch. I wanted to see those magic documents. The High Priest’s just a big meanie.

When I got back to my chambers, Tuuli and Lutz were there, probably having finished their work. They were waiting for me in the first floor’s hallway.

“Tuuli, Lutz. Thanks for waiting.” I sat in one of the chairs with them, and after seeing Delia head to the kitchen to make tea, continued. “Did you finish the books?”

“Only about half of’m. Those orphanage kids haven’t even held a needle before,” said Lutz, to which Tuuli nodded hard.

“He’s not kidding! I couldn’t believe that none of them had used a needle before. Which is bad, ’cause they won’t be able to fix their clothes if they get torn. Should I teach them how to sew, too?”

Those working in the workshop used the same second-hand clothes that the kids used when going to the forest. It wasn’t uncommon for them to rip their sleeves and hems. But since they

didn't know how to sew they had no way of fixing their clothes, unlike kids from the lower city. I wasn't good enough to sew myself, so I had just been thinking about using their messed-up clothing as rags and buying new pairs.

"I'll get sewing kits ready if you're willing to teach, Tuuli. I'm not allowed to work here, and I'm not good at sewing anyway, so..."

"That's true. They definitely wouldn't get better with you teaching them. I think even just teaching them to sew the cuffs of their sleeves would make a difference, so okay. Those sewing kits would be great." It was probably hard for Tuuli to believe that someone could grow up without learning to cook or sew given how important those skills were in life. She looked like a cooking teacher worried about her students.

"The orphanage kids can make their own soup thanks to you and Ella teaching them, and now you're moving on to sewing lessons. Maybe you should have been a teacher, Tuuli."

"Do you want me to teach them or not?" Tuuli pouted a little at being called a teacher, then lowered her eyes. "But... they know how to read, a little. They were reading some when making the books. I didn't expect that little orphan kids would know how to read."

"They've been playing with the karuta set I made for them. You should play with them sometime, Tuuli." The karuta seemed to be teaching the kids to read somewhat effectively. Since I had put all the karuta words into the children's bible, it would be easier for them to read. But it wouldn't be that easy to read for someone not in the temple. I wanted to show one to Benno and see what he thought.

"Lutz, do you have a book ready to give to Benno?"

"Yeah, I got enough for everyone who helped us." Lutz held up four bound books proudly.

"Yay, thank you! Let's go deliver one to Benno tomorrow."

"Yeah."

We could basically just waltz into Benno's store whenever we wanted, and even if he wasn't there we could give the books to Mark. But to meet with the High Priest properly I first had to write a letter requesting a meeting.

"...Looks like I have to write another letter. Dealing with nobles proves to be a pain in the neck once again."

"Sister Myne," said Fran, "shall I have Rosina write it for you?" Despite asking a question, Fran's expression and the nuance of his timing made it clear he wanted to see whether Rosina could manage to write a proper letter yet. An attendant's duty involved writing letters for their master, and there would be no better practice than writing letters to the High Priest. He would no doubt thoroughly correct any mistakes that she might make and then send it right back to her.

“That sounds like a good idea. I shall leave it to her.”

Rosina twitched in fear, but nodded with a graceful smile. *I could really learn from her*, I thought, then noticed that Delia was looking at Rosina full of envy over her being given a new job. Gil was being given all sorts of new work thanks to his involvement with the workshop, and Fran’s work depended entirely on how active I was. Rosina wasn’t skilled with paperwork, but she could manage it and thus Fran was giving her increasingly large portions of his work. Delia probably thought she was being left behind, stuck in a rut of cleaning my chambers and not much else.

...She is working pretty hard to learn to read and do math, though. Gil learned faster since he had the orphanage kids to compete with. Meanwhile, Delia felt like she wasn’t getting better no matter how hard she worked, which was honestly something I could sympathize with. I often felt like I wasn’t getting any better and Lutz was leaving me behind despite both of us being the same age.

Maybe I’m not praising her enough? It was easy to compliment Gil since he always asked for it whenever he did something, but Delia did her daily work without any big fuss at all, which made it hard to find opportunities to compliment her. Taking one’s daily duties seriously was definitely important and impressive, but in the moment it’s kind of hard to just say, *“Thanks for continuing to do what you always do.”*

“Delia, I would like to deliver this book to the High Priest later. Please store it in my desk drawer.”

“Certainly.” Delia took the book, and then I gave her another one.

“Could you leave this somewhere in the hall? I would like for you to read it first and give me your thoughts before anyone else. “

“...Me, first?” Delia blinked in surprise. I nodded.

“Yes. Gil’s working hard in the workshop, but my chambers would fall apart without you, Delia. I would like you to see the completed product first.”

“Th-That’s right. It’s all thanks to me!” Delia lifted her chin high and raced up the stairs with her arms wrapped around the books. Everyone watched her go with warm smiles.

A Book for Benno and First Fitting

I was wearing my apprentice outfit since I was going to the Gilberta Company today. But since it and all my other nice clothes were fairly thin with long sleeves, they were naturally a bit cold for late autumn. The hooded poncho that Benno gave me last winter was serving me well here, but I didn't want to wear it for the rest of my life.

"I think it's about time to buy some winter outfits."

"You mean for when you go north?" asked Tuuli, and I nodded. Nowadays I only really spent a lot of time at home when I was bedridden, which meant I didn't need most of my normal clothes. But in return I was going to the temple and the Gilberta Company all the time, and I would need fancy northern clothes to fit in.

"Invite me when you buy some. I'll definitely win this time!"

Oh yeah, Tuuli and Lutz tied when trying to pick out clothes for me last time, I remembered. Ever since then, Tuuli had started to look at clothes more carefully and wander around the city to observe fashion trends.

"Um, Tuuli. I was thinking about going to get clothes today after giving Benno his book..."

"Wha? But I have work today." Tuuli helped out at the Myne Workshop yesterday since she had the day off. But since apprentices had work every other day, she couldn't go shopping today.

I smiled at Tuuli and put some finished picture books in my tote bag while she glared at me. "Don't worry, I'll wait. We can go on a day we both have off, since I need to get winter clothes for my attendants too. And you'll need a pair yourself since you'll be holding sewing classes in the orphanage, right?"

"Wha?! You'll buy one for me, too?!"

Despite how much Tuuli was helping me—teaching the orphans to cook and sew, taking them to the forest, and so on—I had never paid her for her work. Lutz was being paid a little extra from the Gilberta Company to help me, not to mention his cut of what my new products earned. It was about time Tuuli got rewarded for her efforts too.

"Think of it as your pay for being a teacher."

"...That's a bit much when I'm not teaching them anything special." Tuuli was pursing her lips and pouting, but she looked happy and her cheeks were blushing a little red. If she was happy, I was

happy. *I'll spend as much as it takes to get a cute outfit for her. No cost is too great!*

"Let's go, Myne."

Lutz came to get me, so I grabbed my bag and went outside. I could feel how much cooler the air had gotten.

"Morning, Lutz. I see you've learned to love the poncho too." Lutz was wearing his poncho, which happened to be a different color than mine. He had grown so much over the past year that he hated how tight it felt, but it seemed that even he could no longer stand the cold. "I was just talking to Tuuli about going to buy fancy winter clothes on the next day we both have off."

"Yeah, makes sense. We need some clothes." Lutz looked down at his small poncho and sighed.

By the way, I had grown a little too. The poncho which used to make me look like a bedsheet ghost was now just a little baggy on me. All my growth was no doubt thanks to me consistently donating my mana, which led to far fewer instances of me collapsing from my Devouring. I was as weak as ever, but collapsing less meant eating normal meals more often. Not to mention that at the temple I always ate extravagant meals fit for the nobility. Collapsing less and eating my fill of nutritious food both led to me growing a little. *Thank you Leidenschaft, God of Fire and ruler of growth!*

"Praise be to the gods!"

"What the heck?! Where'd that come from?!"

"Oh, sorry. It just kinda came out." It seemed that the customs of the temple were really rubbing off on me. Before I knew it, I was making the goofy praying pose in the middle of town without even thinking about it. I broke into an embarrassed sweat at all the passersby staring at me, and we hurried on to the Gilberta Company.

"Mark, there's something I want to show Benno. Is he here?"

"Yes, the master is in his office. Please wait just a moment." Mark sorted things out and took us to Benno's office. Benno was sitting at his desk and blasting away at writing something.

"Good morning, Benno." I greeted him after his writing speed slowed down, and he set aside his pen to greet me back. He then looked at Lutz while stretching his back.

"Understood, Master Benno." Lutz must have understood what that look meant, as he told me to sit down and then disappeared behind the door that led to Benno's floor of residence.

"What was that about?"

"He went to tell a servant to start getting tea ready." Benno walked to the table where I was. He wasn't making a big deal about it, but this was the first time I had seen Lutz climb the stairs behind the door.

“Is he allowed to go up there?”

“He’s a leherl, y’know? He’s still living at home and only eating lunch here, but once he’s an adult he’ll be living here just like Mark is.”

“Oh, I see.” Since I ultimately didn’t become an apprentice merchant, I didn’t have a clear idea of how leherls and lehangs differed. I was just thinking of one as a contract employee and the other as a future administrator.

“How do you know so much and so little at the same time?” Benno sighed in exasperation right as Lutz came back. Lutz faltered for a bit, not sure if he should stand behind Benno or beside me.

“You made this with me, Lutz, so sit next to me this time.” I patted the chair beside mine, and Benno nodded. Lutz sat next to me and gave a small smile.

“So, what’ve you got for me?”

“Tadaaa! This! A picture book bible for kids.”

“...You finished it, huh?” Benno murmured in disbelief, then took the picture book I held out to him. He looked at the front, the back, and narrowed his eyes at the string binding it all together.

“You’re keeping it together with just string? You aren’t using any glue?”

“We haven’t made any hide glue yet. I thought about making some starch glue, but that would raise the base price even more, and the orphanage kids didn’t want to waste the flour on it.” They said they would rather eat it than use it to make glue. It was hard for me to argue with that, given how I had seen them starving to death not too long ago.

Benno felt the plants in the front cover. “Not often you see a book cover not made of leather. This is the same kinda flower paper you made for me a while ago, yeah?”

“Yes. I put a little extra effort into it since it’s the cover. I think it would be even prettier with some coloring. I thought of getting pigments from fruit, but the orphanage kids always prioritize eating.”

In the first place, the kids started working since they wanted to have enough to eat. Food was naturally more important to them than books. This time I had them prioritize finishing the books, but in the future I would need to search for pigments that I could get from inedible fruit, plants, stone, and bark.

“You did this much with just black and white?” asked Benno while opening up to the first page. Wilma’s art was positioned such that it was the first thing you saw when you opened the book. Benno widened his eyes and looked at the art. “...This art’s pretty impressive. How’d you get this done?”

“Eheheh. I cut thick paper with a precision knife and put ink on

top of it. That's called stenciling. Wilma worked hard to learn this new art style. Isn't she amazing?" I puffed out my chest with pride for my attendant, but Benno just cradled his head for some reason.

"An entirely new style of art... You just keep making new things without telling me."

"Now now, Benno. You don't need to get so upset. Plant paper itself is so new that really, it doesn't matter what else I introduce here." Books made with parchment already existed, but this was the first time plant paper was being used to make books. Why complain about me tacking on a new style of art on top of that?

"It doesn't matter...? Seriously?"

"I mean, I'm using newly developed ink on new plant paper with art drawn in a new style and printed on paper using new technology that ultimately gets bound together in a new book-binding technique. This picture book bible for kids is built on a mountain of new inventions. Honestly, no part of it *isn't* new."

Benno looked at the book with a grimace, then scratched his head. "Now I've got a headache. But anyway. What're you gonna price it at?"

"Considering that we need to cover for the initial investment, I was thinking a small gold and five large silvers would be a fair price. The initial investment will matter less and less the more books we make, so ultimately the price should settle down to about eight large silvers."

We gathered the soot this time ourselves, but consistently making ink from soot would cost money. Considering the initial investment, the cost of materials, the cost of labor, and the handling fees, a small gold and eight large silvers seemed like the best price to go with. That was on the cheaper side, too, since we were using the paper we made ourselves without going through Benno.

"Oh...?"

"Volrin paper will get cheaper too once more of it's in the market, right? That'll lower the price of the books too. But ink, well... No helping that unless linseed oil gets cheaper. The books are just going to be expensive," I said with defeat. But Benno shook his head slowly.

"The kinda books that nobles buy run them four to five large golds. Yours are a lot cheaper. Dirt cheap, even. And they're good for kids, since the writing's so easy to read."

"You can add a leather cover if you want it to look more fancy, too. I'm just personally more concerned about the quantity and quality of the contents than the cover." Books were expensive enough that you had to be as rich as a noble to buy one. But if they were made even a little cheaper, there would be status-hungry people out there ready to seize the opportunity. And particularly vain rich people

would no doubt jump on them if we added on some fancy covers.

“Makes sense. Rich people would definitely want these. Do you have any plans to make other books?”

“I intend to make several more picture books like this. Carving out stencils for the words is hard enough that I want to keep the text short. Also, my artist has very limited experience. She’s a caged bird who’s never left the temple and can basically only draw religious figures.”

Things were getting better in the orphanage now that they were making their own soup, but most of them still didn’t really understand what uncooked food looked like, and they still lacked a lot of things important to living life outside of the temple. Their lack of baskets and knives for going to the forest made that clear, not to mention sewing kits and all that.

“...That’s pretty extreme.”

“Her upbringing was just that different. Right now, the best thing is for her to keep drawing what she’s best at. I just need to think of stories that allow for that, which shouldn’t be hard since there’s a ton of stories about the gods.”

“True, but if you stick to just religious stuff...”

“It’ll get pretty boring,” interjected Lutz. I shrugged. The orphanage kids liked religious stories the best, but people in the city didn’t seem to like them at all.

“If it comes to making books with just text and none of Wilma’s art, there’s two possible things I’ll want to make first to help with mass production and efficiency.”

“Yeah? And what are those?”

“First, the stencil paper for the mimeograph. You have to make a sheet of plant paper thin enough to be seen through, then cover it with a super thin layer of mixed wax and resin or something, but to be honest, it requires an extremely high level of skill to manage that. And since we don’t have any machines for it, I think we’ll need to get the help of a wax workshop at the very least.”

I really didn’t expect making stencil paper to go smoothly. It would no doubt be a painful journey of forking over failed pieces of plant paper, going through enormous trial and error involving the ratio of mixed waxes, and utterly failing to get the proper thin coating over it all. But if we got it done, things would be a lot easier for us. One could just cut the letters directly into the stencil paper with a sharp pen, no carving out necessary.

“Wax, huh? That’s not gonna happen this season. The workshops are too busy.”

“Agreed. The other thing is movable type printing. I’m still thinking about whether I should start making stencil paper, or if I

should start making punch letters for movable type printing.”

“What’s the problem with that one?” Benno looked confused, as did Lutz.

“Making letter punches will be easy with Johann from the smithy’s help. But movable type printing requires as much arm strength as using a compressor. It would be a little rough for the orphanage kids.”

The printing presses were named as such since you literally had to press down with force to get the printing done. Movable type printing would require a lot of hard manual labor.

“Making the stencil paper for the mimeograph will be hard, but once it’s ready even children will be able to do the printing without much effort.”

“Huh. This is a tough one.” Both Benno and Lutz crossed their arms and fell into thought.

“But well, either way, I’ll need to save up money before I can do anything. I’ve already spent a lot of my savings on this. I won’t be earning anything off these books, either, since they’re going to be textbooks for the orphanage...”

“What?! You’re not gonna sell them?! What the hell are you thinking, Myne?!” Benno blew up at me while I was wondering if the orphanage’s winter handiwork would be enough to earn my money back. I jerked in fear and blinked multiple times.

“It’s not that complicated, Benno. I won’t be able to use them as textbooks if I sell them.”

“Why would you make something you won’t sell?! They’ll make big money, sell them!”

“No way! I’m going to use them as textbooks! And they’re a wonderful investment for the future since they’ll raise the literacy rate! I’m just planting the seeds to grow future customers here.”

This winter would be an important time for seeing how well holding school sessions in the orphanage would go. I wouldn’t sell my textbooks before the big moment. Really, I wanted to buy as many stone slates and calculators as I could get my hands on. But despite my best attempts to explain myself, Benno just shook his head with an exhausted expression.

“I just don’t get you.”

“In the first place, we don’t know how well people will take to these picture books, do we? I think that religious stories haven’t really worked their way into the mainstream since most people just hear them at the temple once or twice and then that’s it. At that point it would be better for me to just make new picture books more suited for the public and sell those instead. We would make way more money that way.” I would rather start making new picture books that could

sell than let Benno take away my textbooks.

“New picture books?” said Benno, interested.

“You’ve already thought of the next story?” asked Lutz.

Both Benno and Lutz looked pretty surprised, but I had a huge stash of stories hidden away in my head. It’s just that not all of them matched the art that Wilma could draw.

“I think that a story about a princess could work, since Wilma served a noble that was basically like a princess. I’ll write down a rough draft and see what the High Priest thinks before making it into a picture book.”

It shouldn’t be too hard to make a picture book based on Cinderella. Sister Christine would probably be a good model for basing the princess on. The prince could be... Well, since all attendants accompanied their masters to the Noble’s Quarter during the Star Festival, Wilma would probably figure something out. She must have seen someone princely in her time there.

“Guess we can talk about this once it’s made. So, how much do I gotta pay for this book?”

“That’s a gift from me to you for all your help, so no money necessary. But, well...” I looked up at Benno, faltering, and his lips curved into a slight grin.

“What do you need this time?”

“I want to go shopping for winter clothes the next day Tuuli has off. Please take us to a secondhand clothing store.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll make sure Mark or I have time that day. Anything else?” asked Benno, prompting me to take out and open my diptych.

“This is about butchering the pig meat in the orphanage, but we’ll need salt and spices, right? What should I get ready, and how much? I don’t know anything about butchering since I’ve always been stuck in bed when it happens, but since it’s the first time the orphanage will be doing it, we need to get the tools and everything ready.”

“That’ll cost you. Do you have enough?” Benno narrowed his eyes at me. I looked back at his dark-red eyes and gave a firm nod.

“I’m prepared to dump all my trombe paper earnings on this.” I had established the workshop in the temple to improve the lives of those in the orphanage. Far be it for me to worry about spending the money on its intended purpose, not to mention that the money was earned by their labor in the first place.

“Alright. I’ll get what you need. But to be clear, I’m gonna be putting the men over there to work. My staff can’t do everything on their own.”

“That’s fair. Oh, and how are my ceremonial robes coming along?”

“Right. Corinna was saying that she wanted to do a first fitting

with you.” Benno stood up immediately and went to his desk. There he rang a bell to summon a maid, who he asked for Corinna’s plans.

“If you’ve got time, Myne, go over to Corinna’s today.”

The servant said that she would summon me when everything was ready, then went back upstairs.

“You can get back to work if you need to, Benno. That’s all I had to talk about.” Benno, as the head of a successful store with a lot of logistics to keep track of, was especially busy as the time for winter preparations approached. I couldn’t ask him to entertain me forever despite our discussion having ended.

I discussed the story of Cinderella with Lutz while waiting and started writing out the text to my next picture book. Eventually, I heard a bell ringing somewhere. Benno looked up, told Lutz to take me to Corinna, then looked back down. Lutz took me through the door in the back of Benno’s office and up the stairs to where Corinna lived.

“Mrs. Corinna, it’s Lutz. I’ve brought Myne.”

“Hello there, Myne. And thank you, Lutz.” After watching Lutz leave, I looked at Corinna. She was wearing looser clothing than last time, a style that wasn’t tight around her belly. That made her belly look a little bigger than it might have otherwise. *Good to see things are going well.*

“This embroidery is quite lovely, isn’t it?” Corinna had drawn large lines for cutting the blue cloth, along which flowed embroidered water with flowers of all seasons stitched in as well.

“It’s so pretty...”

“Now, this is for your first fitting. Please try it out. I want to see if there will be a problem with the length.”

I put on a first fitting outfit made from different cloth than the actual outfit. It fit me perfectly, which made sense given that she made such precise measurements before. But a perfect fit meant that I would grow out of the robes in no time if she made them at this size. *See? I am getting bigger! Eheheh.*

“Corinna, I would like for you to make it longer than this. I would like to have leeway to fold the hem and such so that I can keep wearing them even after growing.” I grabbed the hem of my skirt and folded it up, which made Corinna tilt her head.

“As you did with your baptism ceremony outfit? But would such frills be welcome on ceremonial robes?”

“I only did that so I could wear clothes made for Tuuli, but it’s the same idea. You can’t really sew on new cloth to make it longer after you’ve cut it short, right? You don’t have to make frills from the folds. You can just take the hem, shoulders, and so on, then fold and sew them.” I spoke while squeezing my sleeve, which made Corinna blink in confused surprise.

“Why not just order another one when this one no longer fits? One must consider changing fashions, and ill-fitting clothes won’t look as pretty.”

Kimonos for kids had tucks in the waists and shoulders so they could keep wearing them while growing, but in general the style here was to sell clothes that couldn’t fit to buy new ones. Long-term use wasn’t viewed as important. But I begged to disagree.

“That’s what nobles would do, maybe. They can just buy as many of these expensive outfits as they want, no matter how much they grow.”

It was just coincidence that Benno had given some of his best cloth to the temple as a gift. I had skated by just paying for the dyeing and the commission itself, but in the future I would need to custom order cloth to be woven from thread, which would balloon costs enormously. I didn’t have the money to buy pair after pair of ceremonial clothing that required extremely expensive fabric.

“...A fair point. It seems my sense of context has been skewed since I only ever use this expensive cloth when making clothes for nobles. You are indeed not a noble, Myne.”

“I don’t think fashion trends will matter much for a simple pair of ceremonial robes, so please focus on making them long-lasting.”

Corinna nodded with understanding. “In that case, could you teach me those methods you were discussing? Do you know how to fold the clothing in a way that does not harm the appearance?”

After that we talked about how broad to make the tucks and how to make the outfit long lasting, which marked the end of my first fitting. *Oh no...! I think Tuuli might cry if I tell her I had my first fitting without her.*

Cinderella and a Book for the High Priest

I needed to change into my blue robes once arriving at my chambers in the temple, but I wasn't allowed to change on my own. Delia would throw a tantrum whenever I tried. I had to bend and extend my arms as she pulled the robes over me.

At the start, our cooperation was so poor that it would have been a lot faster for me to change on my own, which was reasonably frustrating. But lately it was going pretty smoothly. *Maybe I'm finally learning to act like a rich girl now*, I thought while Delia did my hair with lowered eyes.

"It was even more splendid than I imagined," she murmured, but I had no idea what she was talking about. I said "What?" with clear confusion, and she glared at me with her light-blue eyes narrowed.

"Geez! The picture book you asked me to read first! You're the one who said you wanted to hear my thoughts on it, Sister Myne!"

"Oh, the picture book. I just wasn't sure what you were talking about for a moment. Thank you for your thoughts. Did you read it all the way to the end? You must have made a lot of progress with your letters." As far as I knew, Delia was studying on her own and thus learning to read a fair bit slower than Gil. I honestly didn't expect her to finish the whole book so quickly.

"...I had Gil help a little. He showed me the karuta."

The thought of Delia wanting to read the book so bad that she asked her rival Gil for help made me smile. As I was grinning to myself, Rosina entered the conversation with a somewhat stern expression.

"Sister Myne, please finish your discussion post haste so that we may begin our harspiel practice. There is not much time."

"What's wrong, Rosina? You look a bit tense."

"The High Priest has instructed you to perform the second song during your meeting." Rosina's answer explained everything. Of course me playing in front of the High Priest would make her tense.

"I suppose I will need to take practice especially seriously for a bit, then. When is the meeting?"

"After lunch," she replied. The lack of a date made me extremely uncomfortable.

"Um, Rosina. After lunch on what day?"

“Today. The meeting is after lunch today.”

According to Fran, who read the letter sent in reply, the High Priest would soon need to travel to a nearby farming town for the Harvest Festival. He wanted to finish our meeting now while he still had the time. I appreciated the fast assistance, but I wasn’t emotionally ready to play the song yet.

“Panicking is not very graceful, Sister Myne. Please take care not to show others the fear in your heart.”

After practicing nonstop like a madwoman until third bell, I went to the High Priest’s room and assisted his paperwork until fourth bell with a completely casual expression, silently signaling to him that I wasn’t nervous about playing the song at all. Once that was done I scarfed down lunch and resumed my blisteringly intense practice with Rosina until the very last moment. I would hope that my behind-the-scenes labor is appreciated.

I was in fact getting better thanks to taking my practice seriously, but playing in front of someone still made me nervous. Especially since this time I had to play a song of my own—one I remembered from my Urano days. It was originally a romance movie’s theme song, but I changed it to a classic song I used to sing in music class. Translating the lyrics directly was a nightmare, but making up lyrics of my own was just too hard. I changed the lyrics bit by bit each practice session, and Rosina always got exasperated when I started humming out the English lyrics directly.

“You will be fine if you just stay calm,” advised Delia. “You’re better at it than I am, Sister Myne.”

“Thank you, Delia. I will do my best.”

Delia encouraged me as I went to the High Priest’s room with Fran carrying my children’s bible and the text for Cinderella, and Rosina carrying my small harspiel.

“My apologies for the short notice. Now, allow me to hear how much you have improved,” said the High Priest with a flat expression that spoke volumes about how sincere his apology really was. He gestured towards the table in the center of the room. I took my harspiel from Rosina and rested it between my thighs before taking a deep breath.

With my heart beating so hard I could feel it in my ears, I played the assigned song, then sang “Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree,” a classic children’s song. I went ahead and swapped out “chestnut tree” for a more local tree to avoid suspicion. The High Priest nodded at both songs, giving me very high praise.

“You’re quite the fast learner. Here is the next song for you to learn. And I must say, I found the song you composed to be very

interesting. Prepare another for next time.”

I looked over the sheet music he gave me. It was depressingly hard, but I was mainly just relieved to have survived this encounter.

“Here you are, Rosina.” I handed Rosina my harspiel and reached out for the tea Arno had prepared. Tea always tastes better after a stressful event. The High Priest did the opposite and set his tea cup back on the table, having finished it while listening to me play.

“Now then. You said you finished your children’s bible?”

“Yes. Here is the picture book.” I looked at Fran, who nodded and smoothly presented the picture book to the High Priest. He looked at it and tapped a finger against his temple.

“This, a book? What have you done to the cover?” The High Priest largely remained expressionless when we weren’t in the hidden room, but his sharp tone made it clear he wasn’t impressed. What about that cover would make him mad?

“What have I done...? It’s just paper.”

“I can see that. Why is there a flower in the paper?”

“Um, because I put it there?”

“I could guess that. I am questioning why you put it there.” The High Priest’s voice sharpened further with frustration due to my failure to give him the answers he wanted. I had no idea why his mood was plummeting like that. Benno thought the flower would please the daughters of nobles, but maybe it was actually banned to put flowers in paper.

“I put it there because it looks cuter with a flower. Is there a problem with that?”

“Because it’s cuter...? No, that is not what I... Nevermind. Follow me.” The High Priest shook his head with sheer disbelief, then stood up and headed to the hidden room beside his bed. I stood up too, just as confused.

“Sister Myne, take this.” Fran hurriedly held out the paper with my Cinderella story written on it. I thanked him and took it from him, then followed the High Priest through the doorway.

The hidden room was as messy as ever. I went to the same bench as always. When I started moving aside the documents on the bench, I realized that they might be the legendary magic documents themselves.

“Stop. I believe I told you not to look at those.” The High Priest noticed what I was trying to do and pulled the documents out of my hand, stacking them on his desk. No doubt all the documents on his desk pertained to magic. I looked around the room, and oddly enough it felt like an entirely new place now. The High Priest furrowed his brow while bringing over his chair.

“Do not get distracted either.”

“Sorry. So... what are we doing here?”

“I was asking you how you fit a flower into paper. I won’t force the answer out of you if it’s a trade secret, but you must admit that putting flowers into paper is strange.”

“I don’t think so. You just scatter them into the pulp when swishing it around.”

“...You scatter them?” The High Priest didn’t understand me at all, not even when I wiggled my fingers to act out scattering flowers over a suketa. Only then did I realize the High Priest was only familiar with parchment, paper made from animal skin. Of course flowers in paper would be strange if you only knew how to make parchment. Wrapping flowers within a tangle of fiber just wasn’t possible with parchment.

“Well, plant paper is made in an entirely different way from parchment, so if you really want to know, you’ll probably want to watch it being made in the workshop.”

“Indeed, that would be for the best. It is impossible to glean anything from your explanations.” The High Priest gave up on getting an answer from me and crossed his legs, putting the children’s bible onto his lap. He opened the front page, and upon seeing the first illustration immediately grimaced and glared at me.

“Books are works of art. They must be beautiful, with gold and gems in their leather covers and their pages filled with color. This book has little value as art. You are wasting this high-quality art by leaving it in black and white. Add color.”

It seemed that the High Priest viewed books as works of art created by calligraphers who provide beautiful writing, artists that provide illustrations, and leather craftsmen who provide the covers. Thinking back to the books I had seen in the book room, I could understand what he was getting at.

“Adding color would be the waste here. Just how much money do you think that would cost? I’m going to use these to teach the orphanage kids to read. I would rather make more than add color to some.”

“Books are works of art, and each is one of a kind. I don’t understand what you are saying,” said the High Priest, and I wanted to shoot that right back at him. And so I did, without really thinking about it.

“I don’t understand what *you* are saying, High Priest. Books aren’t just works of art, they’re crystallizations of knowledge and wisdom. I’m not trying to make art to look at here, I’m trying to mass produce affordable books that everyone can read.”

“Mass produce? You intend to make people write them en masse? That could work if you teach all the orphanage children to read, but it will still take a staggering amount of time to produce that many

books.” The High Priest rubbed his temples and tapped his fingers, bemused. But I was focused on printing, not the kind of mass production he was thinking of that would take forever.

“No, you’re misunderstanding. I’m going to mass produce them through printing. I’ve already made thirty picture books just like this one, and—”

“Wait just a moment.” The High Priest interrupted me, an eyebrow shot upwards. His golden eyes were opened wide in surprise as he looked at me in disbelief. “Do you mean you already have thirty books just like this one?”

“Like I said, I printed them.”

“Elaborate.” It seemed the High Priest didn’t have a grasp on what was going on in the Myne Workshop, perhaps because he’d never asked, or perhaps because Fran didn’t really understand either. I thought that Fran would have reported everything to him since we were providing income reports and paying the temple its cut, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. The High Priest was lacking such critical information I didn’t even know where to begin.

“Do you know that the Myne Workshop is producing plant paper?”

“Yes.”

“We’re making thicker paper, then cutting out letters and the black parts of art from it using a... very thin, precise knife. The resulting paper is called a stencil template.”

“You cut out the paper?” The High Priest’s tone rose in a way that made it clear just how abnormal cutting out parts of paper was. I pretended not to hear. What’s done was done.

“Then, we put the template over a blank piece of paper and roll ink onto it. Only the paper beneath the cut out parts of the template get ink on them. We move aside the finished paper and place another sheet of fresh paper beneath the template, then roll more ink onto it. That results in two identical pieces of paper. We repeat this process thirty times for each page of a book, and that’s thirty books.”

About halfway through my explanation, the High Priest had stopped reacting at all, freezing up like a crashed computer. I asked if he was listening and waved my hands in front of his eyes.

“...I am listening. I am, but...” The High Priest, having come back to life, shut his eyes tightly and let out a heavy sigh. Not even Benno reacted like that. It kinda made me worried.

“Umm. Is everything okay?”

“...You certainly have done something drastic.”

Have I really? I thought, thinking back over what I had done to make the paper. The most drastic thing I did was probably cut off the woodblocks to focus on stencils instead, but I doubted that’s what he

was referring to. I couldn't figure out what he considered so drastic. As I fell into thought, the High Priest let out yet another sigh.

"In summary, by printing you mean cutting out paper and applying ink onto fresh paper?"

"For right now, at least."

"Cutting out paper is unthinkable in itself, but it's also hard to believe that you are using so much ink."

Parchment was so expensive and scarce that I guess nobody had ever cut out parts of it. Plant paper was similarly expensive, but the Myne Workshop produced it and I knew how stencil printing worked, so it didn't seem like a waste to me. The High Priest and I would never see eye to eye on the matter given what we expected from our books, but I knew for sure that making stencils and printing books would be a better use of money than fussing over leather covers.

"Frankly," I said, "I find it hard to believe you would spend so much money on the cover. As for the ink, it was fairly cheap since I made it out of the soot that the priests gathered for me."

"You actually did make ink out of the soot?"

I had explained previously when he got suspicious about the soot gathering that I wanted it for ink, but it seemed he had expected me to fail. The stunned look on his face honestly threw me off.

"...Is it that surprising?"

"Of course it is."

"Benno said that his head hurt when I gave him his book, but he immediately shifted over to calculating prices and talking about my next book, so I didn't think it was that big of a deal."

All things considered, Benno was used to the things I did and could lessen the shock of a new invention by focusing on the profit as a merchant. The High Priest's shock was probably a more normal reaction. As I thought that over, the High Priest slowly shook his head, then looked up at a window with a somewhat distant look in his eyes.

"...Benno might have it much harder than I thought. I can only imagine the emotional burden he must bear if you consistently invent things of this caliber."

"Bwuh?! I mean, he's a merchant, he wants things to sell. He does have it hard, but that's because he goes out of his way to get involved in things. It's not all my fault. Maybe."

Benno himself had chosen to fight with the Parchment Guild by establishing a Plant Paper Guild, and he had chosen to compete with Leise by constructing an expensive Italian restaurant. But the High Priest just let out a dismissive "hmph" with his lips curving into a grin.

"I will have to ask Benno about this, not you. But first. Did you

just say something about a next book?"

"I did. What about it?"

"Be absolutely certain to report to me before you begin making it. I would not like to be surprised in this manner again."

If it's something big enough to surprise you, I think you'll be surprised no matter when I report it to you, I replied silently before holding out the sheet of paper that Fran had given me. It would be ideal for him to look it over directly.

"I was thinking of making my next picture book about Cinderella here, but what do you think?" I showed him the Cinderella story I wrote yesterday, and after skimming it the High Priest rubbed his temples.

"In what world would a rich commoner be allowed to marry a prince? Are you daft, or do you simply not understand social status?"

"I understand status, but... Well... How high in status would she have to be for you to accept this? Keeping in mind the idea is her getting lucky with marrying above her status, since that's what people want for themselves." If it was bad enough for him to call me daft, it would probably be better for me to look for a compromise. I asked for a middle ground and the High Priest put a hand on his chin, falling into thought.

"...When it comes to a prince, even the daughter of an archnoble would need to be quite well-raised and special. Marriage upwards is simply out of the question. Have her become his mistress instead. That would still be quite the lucky boost in status, no?"

"No no no! Where's the romance in her becoming a mistress? The hopes, the dreams?!"

"Dreams mean nothing. Face reality." The crux of the story was a dramatic marriage upwards, but the High Priest wouldn't budge on the matter. That was too cruel. We read books to see dreams, not cruel reality.

"Um, what about a small-time archduke instead of a prince? Could someone of lower status marry him? Could that work as a story?"

"Hmmm. It depends on the size of his territory, but he could potentially marry beneath him. If he was willing to face the resistance of his family and other nobles, of course." A couple defying status and overcoming resistance to successfully get married was a classic story with a classic happy end. I let out a sigh of relief, glad to have found a compromise.

"Okay, I'll make him the son of an archduke instead."

"Make Cinderella the daughter of a mednoble as well. Being wealthy enough. And what is with this magician? In what world would these bizarre chants result in any magical effect? Even considering your ignorance of magic, this is painful to read."

Due to the High Priest's thorough criticism of Cinderella, the story ended up being one without magic where the daughter of a mednoble was abused by her stepmother until a noble related to her birth mother assisted her entry into high society, where the son of a minor duke fell in love with her at first sight. There was hardly a trace of Cinderella in it anymore, but most of my readers were going to be nobles at first so I would take his advice gladly.

Oh, and as an aside, there were three tiers of nobles: laynobles, mednobles, and archnobles. They were the low rank, middle rank, and high rank of the nobility respectively. A laynoble would be too low in status to marry an archduke's son, but it seemed that a mednoble just barely managed to cut it.

"However. You say that they lived happily ever after, but that will certainly not be the case for them."

"What?"

It turned out that after pushing through with their marriage, the archduke father would most likely banish them from his lands. Even if he forgave them in an act of unprecedented generosity, the son would lose his right to succession and would end up in a support role for his little brother at the very best. I didn't intend to write that part of the story, but in any case, thanks to the High Priest's utterly merciless follow-up, the version of Cinderella I was about to write would have no happy ending at all.

This was a valuable learning experience for me. Since this is an actual fantasy world with magic and such, the people here won't look kindly on my biased, made-up fantasy. It might be harder to write stories for my books than I thought.

A Discussion About Winter Preparations

“High Priest, there is one more thing I want to discuss.” I turned to look at the High Priest while organizing the rewritten Cinderella pages on my lap. He noticed my look and set the documents he had been looking over onto his desk. “It’s about the orphanage’s winter preparations.”

“Winter preparations...? Ah, yes. I predict that the amount of divine gifts and firewood will be largely unchanged from last year, but I will have Fran give you a more detailed report later. I won’t have a clear answer until the blue priests return from the Harvest Festival, but the weather has been favorable and there haven’t been any widespread crop diseases. There shouldn’t be any less food than last year.”

“Oh? You can predict it?”

I’d assumed that he wouldn’t have any idea until the blue priests returned. *How could he make a prediction when he hardly ever leaves the temple?* I thought, blinking in surprise. I got my information from my family going to the market and all the rumors that flowed through the Gilberta Company alongside its merchandise, but I couldn’t recall the High Priest leaving the temple since I got here.

“The weather is one thing, but how do you know about the state of the crops in farming towns? You haven’t left the city before, have you?”

“I have my connections. I may not enter the lower city, but I do go to the Noble’s Quarter.”

My view of the city was founded in the lower city, but the High Priest’s view was founded in the Noble’s Quarter. That explained where he got his information from. This was complete bias on my part, but I had no doubt that there was a devious war of information that went on between nobles at all times.

“Myne, would it be correct for me to assume that you have begun to prepare the orphanage for winter on your own?”

“Yes. I’ll be getting tools and supplies through Benno. And since we’re doing it for ourselves, both the gray priests and the children will be helping.”

“...By children, you mean the pre-baptism younglings?” The High Priest widened his eyes in surprise. As a noble, he didn’t have the

concept of someone working for their own food. And up until now he had been forced to keep the pre-baptism kids more or less locked in the orphanage, so the idea of having them work never occurred to him.

However, that kind of thinking wouldn't fly with us poor people. The principle of working for your own food had permeated through the orphanage and the hungry boys all fought to do the most work and get the most food. The young kids were no exception, since the divine gifts went to them last.

"This is normal in the lower city. Even young kids can help. Though I've never been much help myself since I always end up bedridden."

"I can imagine."

"Anyway, the pig butchering itself will be done in a farming town, but I'll want to make hide glue and candles from cow fat afterwards. I imagine it will stink pretty bad, which might cause problems..." I peered at the High Priest timidly and he grimaced a little.

"The blue priests certainly would complain if the orphanage began to stink up the temple."

"Figures."

Both the hide glue and the candles would smell extremely bad, so my plan had been to make them outside the workshop. The noble section of the temple was a fair distance away from the orphanage, but no way would the smell go unnoticed. My backup plan was to do it in the original Myne Workshop, the old storage building, but there wasn't enough space for everyone and moving the tools back and forth would be a nightmare. I wanted to keep working in the orphanage if at all possible.

"This would normally be a difficult situation, but... well, most of the blue priests will be absent for the next ten days due to the Harvest Festival. The stench could be overlooked during that time. But once they return, expect to have no opportunity to cause such a smell in the temple again."

I wasn't sure if the pig butchering could be finished during the Harvest Festival. I didn't have the pigs or the tools ready. But maybe I could make something work if I talked to Benno.

"Understood. I'll talk to Benno." I clenched my fist in determination, having finally seen a glimmer of hope, and the High Priest brushed aside his bangs.

"...Myne. Will you be able to afford winter preparations for that number of people?"

"I'll be using the money they earned themselves in the Myne Workshop, so it'll be fine."

"Good, I would not have liked for you to bear that immense

burden all on your own. But to think that you truly enabled them to earn enough to support themselves..."

"It's still mostly thanks to the divine gifts, though." I shrugged at the High Priest's impressed tone. If not for the divine gifts, the Myne Workshop wouldn't be earning enough to support the entire orphanage. We were honestly kind of a shady place that ran on child labor for cheap.

"It is still good news for me. I had been anticipating this winter to be truly brutal on them." The High Priest gave me rare praise with an uncharacteristically warm expression. I smiled, happy to know that my efforts to help the orphanage hadn't been fruitless.

"There will be no issue with the orphanage's winter preparations if you can finish them in ten days. I myself am more concerned with *your* winter preparations," explained the High Priest, which confused me. I would be doing my winter prep at home. Or more accurately, my family would since I would just get in the way. I would try to do a bit more this year since I had grown a little and Mom was pregnant, but I doubted the High Priest would be worried about that.

"I don't follow. My winter preparations will be done at home."

"That won't work. There is the Dedication Ritual in the winter. You know of this one, yes?" The High Priest leaned forward, focusing his light-gold eyes on me.

The Dedication Ritual was one ritual the High Priest had told me about, with a firm note that I would need to attend no matter the circumstances. It was a ritual where we of the temple prayed for life to bloom once again in spring, prayed for safe growth, and completely filled all the divine instruments in the temple with mana. If we didn't fill them with mana to the brim, there wouldn't be enough mana to offer to the farming towns during Spring Prayer, which would harm the next crop harvest.

"As the Dedication Ritual requires a large amount of mana, you absolutely must participate. You must not be allowed to miss it due to blizzards. Therefore, you will be staying at the temple over the winter."

"I understand that blizzards could get in the way of me offering mana to the divine instruments. But staying here would worry my family to death. I really do get sick often in the winter, so..."

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I was allowed to be a blue shrine maiden entirely due to how important the Dedication Ritual was, so I could understand where the High Priest was coming from. But me staying in the temple all winter was a different matter. What would I say to my family?

"I can sympathize with how your family would feel. Thus, I will permit them to enter your chambers to check up on you over the

winter. That is the largest compromise I can make. Do not slack on preparing your chambers for winter.”

The High Priest told me not to slack, but preparing for winter was a big enough deal that laziness hardly entered the equation. Preparing my own chambers for winter on top of the orphanage was a huge, unexpected expense. I left the High Priest’s room feeling ill.

...Nooooo! My winter prep is going to be harder than the orphanage’s!

“Sister Myne, you seem quite pale...” observed Rosina.

“I am fine, Rosina. I just happen to be a little disturbed. Fran, I heard from the High Priest that I must spend the entire winter in the temple.” I responded to Rosina with a smile, then spoke to Fran about winter preparations. He gave a slow nod of understanding.

“Given the Dedication Ritual, it will be difficult to allow you to commute from home.”

“...I didn’t anticipate having to do my own winter preparations at all. What will I need?”

“We are already planning to buy firewood and food for the orphanage, so we need merely buy more. There should be little problem with buying just a little extra of everything.” Fran saying that it wouldn’t be a big deal was enough for me to let out a sigh of relief. Still, I wouldn’t know just how much extra it would cost until we crunched the numbers.

“...Rosina, forgive me, but could you go summon Lutz from the workshop?”

“As you wish.”

Upon arriving back at my chambers, we continued our winter preparations discussion while Delia prepared tea. I wrote onto my diptych the things I would need for my day-to-day life, what I would need for winter handiwork, what I would need for gathering parues, and then thought about anything else I might need. Fran went to talk to the chefs to learn their plans and see if they could live in my chambers over the winter.

Before long, Lutz came back from the workshop, brought by Rosina. “What’s up, Myne?”

“Quick question. I don’t know this since I’ve never really been involved with it, but do you think we can finish butchering the pigs within ten days?” I told Lutz about what the High Priest had to say about our plans, which made him grimace.

“You don’t think that’s rushing it too much? I don’t even know if we’ll be able to rent a smoke room.”

“It’s definitely rushing too much, but right now while the blue priests are gone is our only chance. If it’s not possible we can make the hide glue in our old storage building, but it’s small and bringing tools there would be a pain, wouldn’t it?” The storage room was only

about ten square meters large, not nearly big enough for the work we'd be doing. Lutz wrinkled his nose at the thought of that.

"I'll go to the store and see what Master Benno thinks. If it's gonna come down to us working in the storage building, I'm sure he'll at least check with the farming towns about doing this fast. Have Fran walk you to the store on your way home."

"Okay. Thanks a lot, Lutz." After watching Lutz dash off to the Gilberta Company, I looked down at my diptych and got back to writing. My presence here really did have a significant impact on how much stuff we needed to order. Even a little girl needs a lot of food to survive several months.

...This is bad. I might not actually have enough money for this. I need to hurry and finish Cinderella.

"You'll need new clothes too, Sister Myne," chimed in Delia.

"Don't worry, I was actually planning to go clothes shopping as soon as possible. It hit me that the orphanage kids and my attendants will need them too. Mmm, but if I'm going to be buying clothes for that many kids, maybe I should take my attendants with me?" I thought aloud and heard Delia let out a loud cry of excitement. It seemed she was very interested in shopping for winter clothes.

In contrast, Rosina seemed a bit unenthusiastic. She would no doubt rather stay at home playing her harspiel. "...The orphans have their divine gifts," she observed. "I do not believe they will need winter clothes when they do not need to go outside."

It was true that they had survived up until now on divine gifts, and if they stayed inside the temple they would probably be fine. But I wanted them to go gather parues on sunny winter days.

"There are some winter days where they will need to go to the forest, which means they will need hats and gloves." I had at my disposal a large group of people who were used to gathering in the forest. How could I not take advantage of this? Especially considering that my mom couldn't go to the forest this year, due to being pregnant. I fully intended to have Tuuli lead the children in a heroic charge to secure our fair share of parues.

...I'm abusing my power? Say whatever you want, sweet food is rare in the winter and I'm not about to miss out on parues.

They would need warm clothes for this, and sleds to carry their sweet loot. Metal sheets and spatulas for cooking the parue cakes would be nice too. I wrote down everything that came to mind onto my diptych. After adding up the prices, I confirmed that I didn't have enough money for it all.

"Sister Myne, it seems that Ella will be willing to stay over the winter if you have a room for her." Fran had successfully negotiated for Ella to take the lead as head chef while we were snowed in, with

orphanage kids who were interested in cooking helping her.

“Rosina, please ask Wilma who would be good helpers for Ella. She’s always the one who makes the soup. Fran, Lutz went to the store ahead of us. Please take me there.”

“As you wish.” Rosina and Fran both replied at the same time.

I noticed Delia kind of fidgeting behind them, and apparently she had been waiting for us to finish talking. She piled on question after question while undoing my sash and pulling off my robes.

“So, Sister Myne. Where will you be shopping? Will you buy winter clothes for me too? Will you pick out your own clothes? How much will you buy?”

“You’re getting too excited, Delia. At this rate you won’t be able to sleep tonight.” I couldn’t help but smile at Delia’s overbearing enthusiasm.

“Geez! Of course I’m going to get excited! This is shopping we’re talking about!” declared Delia, her light-blue eyes shining.

“Delia, you need to hurry and finish changing Sister Myne. Fran is waiting down below,” chided Rosina. Delia hurriedly got back to changing my clothes and finished as soon as possible.

“Now then, I believe we will be going shopping for winter clothes tomorrow. I would like for all of you to come to the Gilberta Company at third bell. Wilma can come as well if she wishes, but I do not believe she will.” I explained to Delia my plans while climbing down the stairs, and after opening the door for me she spun around with a broad smile.

“Third bell tomorrow? As you wish. Have a good evening, Sister Myne!”

Fran and I smiled at how excited Delia was, then left. I felt the cool evening air on my skin as I talked to Fran about what I had written on my diptych.

“Fran, could you tell Gil to bring five of the children’s bibles in the workshop to the Gilberta Company tomorrow?”

“...Certainly, but may I ask why?” asked Fran, blinking in surprise. He knew how firm I had been about using the books as textbooks for the orphans. Given that he was basically my secretary at this point, I decided it was best to tell him everything.

“I won’t have enough money unless I sell them.”

“...Pardon me?”

“The High Priest didn’t seem to think it was a big deal, but me needing to stay in the temple over winter came completely out of left field for me. I need to order everything from Benno as soon as possible, but there’s not enough time to make the second batch of picture books, and I can’t sell the paper or ink we have since I need them for the picture books... My hands are tied.”

Fran didn't seem to know how to reply to my brutally honest confession. He froze up, his mouth opening and closing with no words coming out. *He sure freezes up like the High Priest does when he's confused*, I thought while looking up at him. Fran shook his head.

"Is that fine? I mean, not having money. I don't, erm, fully understand what it means to not have any money. Does it mean... we cannot go shopping?"

As someone who had been raised in the orphanage and served a noble wealthy enough to bring five books with him to the temple, Fran had apparently never ran out of money before. He said that only after beginning to serve me did he learn that not everyone got what they wanted, that even his master would have to settle for less without money, and that one had to work to earn their money.

"It will be fine, Fran. We'll be selling Cinderella soon, and I'm confident we'll earn everything back through winter handiwork. It's just right now that I don't have the money to spare. And Delia was so happy to go shopping. So don't tell the others about us running out of money. Just say that Benno really insisted on us selling some since the picture books were that good. It would be a shame to spoil the shopping mood, wouldn't it?"

"...As you wish."

The Gilberta Company came into distant view just as our conversation wound down. I could see someone standing in front of the store. He turned this way and waved, at which point I realized it was Lutz.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Lutz."

"No prob. Let's go home."

"Thank you for coming with me, Fran. Please return to the temple once the sun begins to set. See you tomorrow."

Fran nodded with a conflicted smile, then crossed his arms in front of his chest and gave a tiny bow before turning around. Lutz and I headed home while talking about how his discussion with Benno went.

"Master Benno said he's gonna try and work something out with a farming town. All depends on how many of the smoke rooms are reserved."

"Okay. I sure hope we can finish the hide glue before the blue priests get back..." I trailed off with uncertainty, which made Lutz shake his head with exasperation.

"Myne, you should be more worried about the pig butchering than the hide glue. It's gonna be a bunch of newbies, yeah? The store's winter prep comes later, so there's not gonna be many people with experience to help out. Master Benno asked a butcher to send some help, but it's gonna be rough without some more experienced people."

Our initial plan had been to do our winter prep with the Gilberta Company, but now that we had to speed things up, we would be doing it all separately. That alone meant there would be a lot fewer experienced people to help. We would have a bunch of people who didn't know what to do, almost all of whom had never seen a pig killed before. It was hard to think they would be that helpful, especially considering how little help I tended to be.

"...I'll try and get Dad's help, but it's kind of hard to ask when we don't even know when the butchering will happen." Mom was out of the question due to her pregnancy, but it would be nice if Dad and Tuuli could help. The only thing was that I couldn't even bring it up with them until I knew when it was happening.

"Yeah, true. But, uh... are you gonna be okay? Pretty sure Gunther's gonna get ticked about you staying in the temple all winter."

Indeed. After dinner today would be our first family meeting in a long time. They wouldn't have any choice but to accept it, but I could already picture how worried and angry they would be. It kinda made my stomach hurt.

"Don't sweat it, though. Your job's offering mana. I think you're gonna be better off staying in the temple too. Your chambers are a lot warmer than your family's place, which'll help stop you from getting colds, and Fran's gotten a pretty good grasp on your health by now."

"Thanks, Lutz. I'm going to tell them you said that. My family trusts you waaay more than me, for some reason."

"Good luck," said Lutz, and we split ways at the well. I reluctantly climbed my way up the stairs.

"So, Myne. What happened?"

The moment I said I had something to talk about, everyone's expression darkened in an instant. Thinking about it, I never really brought any good news home. It was always stuff like the limit of my lifespan, me entering the temple, the letter from the temple... I could hardly blame them for being anxious.

"Ummm, well, the thing is... the High Priest had some bad news for me. The temple has an important ritual during the winter, and they can't afford for me to miss it due to blizzards. He wants me to start staying in the temple once snow starts to fall."

"What's the big idea?! He said you could stay at home!" As expected, Dad hit the table and exploded with anger. Tuuli and Mom both nodded alongside him.

"He did, but the Dedication Ritual is really important. If we don't fill up the divine instruments with enough mana, next year's harvest won't go well. Less crops would hurt a lot of people, wouldn't it?"

“Wha? The temple does stuff like that?” asked Tuuli, full of surprise, and I nodded. I hadn’t known any of the rituals performed by the temple until I became an apprentice shrine maiden. Most people in the temple didn’t really go to the lower city, and most people only ever went inside for their baptisms and adulthood ceremonies. The temple itself didn’t publicize everything it did, either, so most city people didn’t think very highly of it.

“Still, your health’s more important. You might die if they just lock you up in the temple.”

“Lutz said that Fran has gotten really good at watching my health now. And you’ll be allowed to come check up on me. The High Priest said letting you in the temple to see me was the biggest compromise he could make.”

Dad ground his teeth together. It was painfully clear that although he understood the importance of the ritual and that the High Priest was doing everything he could, he still didn’t want to give his permission.

“What do you want to do, Myne?” asked Mom, rubbing her stomach gently to calm herself down. I already gave the High Priest my reply and had multiple people helping me to get my winter preparations done. I only had one answer for her.

“...I want to stay in the temple. It’s my job to be there.”

“Myne!” shouted Dad, but I just shook my head slowly.

“Dad, don’t forget that I’m the orphanage director now too. I have to take care of the orphans. And they only let me be a blue robe at all because I have mana, remember? If not for this, I would be forced to do hard labor.”

Dad clenched his fist tightly. He ground his teeth, swallowed his words, and shut his eyes tight.

“The High Priest accepted all of our conditions. I have to keep my word and go to the ritual that needs my mana. You know how I haven’t been collapsing from the Devouring at all lately? That’s because I’ve been donating my mana. This is for my sake too.”

I would probably be dead or close to it by now if not for the temple’s magic tools. I was only alive thanks to offering my mana up to the divine instruments in the temple.

“What’ll you do if you get sick there?”

“I have a bed in my chambers, and my attendants will make sure I’m not left all on my own. Though I’ll want Tuuli to teach them what to do when I get a fever.”

“That bed really is fluffy and nice,” murmured Tuuli, who had been in my room in the temple before.

“I can do that,” said Mom. “I’ll want to look over your room there, too.”

“You can’t move around much right now, can you? Please don’t push yourself, Mom.”

“I’ll be fine. Pregnancy isn’t a disease, you know. My morning sickness has been getting better too.”

Mom decided all on her own to look over my chambers and introduce herself to my attendants once she was feeling a little better. She was already operating on the assumption that I would be staying there, now that she knew I wanted to. It was too late for us to go against decisions made by the nobles in the temple.

Dad scratched his head, a look of defeat on his face. “...You said we can go check up on you, yeah?”

“Uh huh. And please do, I’ll miss you.”

“I was gonna go to the orphanage over the winter anyway since I’m the sewing teacher, so that’s fine! I’ll still see you all the time!” Tuuli talked about her plans in the orphanage with a bright smile, which made Dad give a sullen frown and glare at me.

“Why are you always asking Tuuli for help, Myne? You should ask your dad for help sometimes.” He was starting to get pouty since he wanted me to rely on him more. I hurriedly searched for something he could do.

“Umm... Could you help me teach the orphanage how to do winter handiwork, then? Like cutting wooden boards, carving grooves into them, and all that. It’s too much for Lutz to do all on his own.”

“Alright, you can count on me. Anything else?”

He wasn’t a professional, but he was good with his hands, so I asked him to teach the orphans the art of woodcrafting. He accepted with a grin. If he was that eager to help, well, there was no end to the things I could ask him to do.

“Also, um, we haven’t settled on a day yet, but I would like your help butchering pigs for the orphanage. Nobody in the orphanage has done it before, and that meat will be our food for the winter.”

“Sounds pretty serious. I’ll see if I can get the day off work once you settle your plans.”

“Also, could you tell me more about what we need for winter? I don’t really know what winter preparation is like since I’m usually sick during it. Who knows what my chambers might be missing...”

After that, we all started talking about what I would need for winter and things to check. Most of what they said had to do with my poor health, and I wrote it all down with an exasperated smile.

Off to Buy Winter Clothes

The plan was to meet up at the Gilberta Company at third bell, then go clothes shopping. Benno called me and Lutz over a bit earlier than that so we could talk about winter prep.

“What do you want to do, Tuuli?” I asked. “Won’t this conversation be boring to you?”

“She can talk to Corinna about winter handiwork,” said Benno, which made Tuuli’s blue eyes sparkle with happiness. Benno rang his bell and a maid came out from the inner door, who then took the excited Tuuli upstairs.

“...Anyway,” continued Benno, “as of this morning, I’ve got two pigs and two butchers ready to go. You’d have a lot of problems with just a bunch of newbies around, yeah?”

“Really?! Already?! You’re so fast, Benno! I can’t believe it!” I clapped and showered Benno with praise, to which he responded with a confident grin and his head raised in pride. I was about to order a bunch of tools from him, so now was the time to butter him up. “You’re amazing, Benno! Incredible! You’d be even more amazing if you lowered the price!”

“Not a chance, idiot.”

“You gotta be more subtle than that, Myne,” added Lutz. My attempt to lower the handling fee had ended with both of them looking at me like I was an idiot.

“Seems like the smokehouses are mostly gonna be empty for the next ten days. Most people wanna smoke their meat as late as possible to make it last longer. When do you want this to happen?”

When it came to preserving meat for winter, there definitely weren’t many people who wanted to start early. In my neighborhood, most people didn’t start until right before the first sign of snow. With our storage room being chilly somewhat like a refrigerator, the main problem was less the food spoiling and more just using it for meals too early. The food might run out halfway through winter if you weren’t careful.

“Three days from now, please. That’s when both Dad and Tuuli have a day off.”

“Alright. I’ll plan around it happening three days from now, then. I ordered the tools way back when we decided to do this together, so I have most of them ready. Use what you have at home and I’ll lend you

whatever else you need.”

“Thanks. Also, this is what the orphanage will need for winter outside of firewood and food.” I handed Benno a board. He glanced over the list, then groaned with a grimace.

“...This sure is a lot.”

“This is the first time they’re preparing for winter, so we’re basically starting with nothing. And there’s a lot of people there, too.”

“If they’ve managed with nothing up until now, why bother preparing this stuff at all?” asked Lutz, and I gave a pained smile. In truth, that had been my initial plan for the orphanage. I had thought it would be fine to just get firewood and food this year, then slowly get whatever else they needed over time.

“The problem is, my parents weren’t happy about me staying in the temple over the winter. Now I need to get all this stuff ready.”

“Yeah, you do pass out and end up stuck in bed a lot,” observed Benno. “Your family’s not wrong to be nervous about sending you off on your own.”

“Your chambers are definitely lacking a lot of little things you’d need to live there,” added Lutz.

Meals wouldn’t be a problem since I was already eating lunch there, but I was missing a lot of daily life stuff I would need for bathing and sleeping. I didn’t have things like towels or sheets, and my bed had a mattress but no blankets. Stuff from home wouldn’t fit in that room at all, and I would still need it all whenever I went home, so I had no choice but to buy new stuff.

Sadly, my room didn’t have a winter carpet to lay on the floor either. I was told that the one left by the last resident had gotten moldy in their absence, and was no longer usable.

“Myne, need me to lend you money?” offered Lutz.

“No thanks. You shouldn’t lend money to friends if you can help it. That kind of thing runs the risk of destroying a friendship.”

Fran came with my other attendants after third bell rang. They were all wearing gray jackets on top of their outside clothes. Their jackets were simple enough that they wouldn’t stick out at all if they had different scarves or gloves. But since they were all wearing the same jacket of the same color, they stuck out immensely.

“The faster you buy clothes the better, huh?” observed Lutz.

“Yup. I feel like I should just buy coats for them instead of new outfits. A coat would be warm enough that they could wear their priest stuff beneath it without a problem,” I suggested, which made Benno shout with his dark-red eyes widened in surprise.

“Not a chance! That’s not good enough. Buy them all a full set of clothes!”

"I know, I know. I just wanted to say it."

"Yeah right. You were serious and I know it."

Benno read my mind, so I averted my eyes and went to go outside while Lutz went up the stairs to get Tuuli.

"Everyone gets a set of clothes. You too, Tuuli. Just look for something you want."

"Okay!"

Tuuli and Delia skipped away excitedly and began picking out clothes, squealing among themselves as they looked over the children's outfits. Lutz and Gil were similar in height, so they started searching for clothes together too. Rosina, as a teen, was quietly looking at clothes elsewhere on her own.

"...Are you certain about this, Sister Myne?" asked Fran nervously. I did the math in my head and nodded. I had enough money left to buy clothes from here. With the math done, I glanced at the bag Fran was holding.

"The clothes here are cheap enough for it to not matter. If it gets to be a problem, I can just sell the books. Why don't you go pick out some clothes for yourself too, Fran? You can even wear them in your room when it gets cold." This was one of the few opportunities where I could act like a proper master, so I at least wanted them to enjoy today. Fran's eyes wavered with worry.

"I am not certain on what basis I should pick my clothes..." When it came to his master, Fran could pick proper clothes based on where they were going, the season, their business, who they were meeting, and so on; but when it came to his own clothes, he was stuck. Fran was awkward when outside of his element, and it was up to me to teach him how to pick clothes for himself.

"First, look for things that fit you. Then look at what they're made of. It's winter, so you'll want warm clothes. When you've found warm clothes that fit you, I'll pick the clothes that suit you the most."

"I would be honored," said Fran, overwhelmed. I smiled at how out of his element he was, which somehow made me remember what Mom was saying yesterday.

"Fran, my mom would like to meet you. When would be a good time for that?" I told him that my mom wanted to see my room and make sure I would be safe over the winter, which made Fran lower his eyes with worry.

"...Sister Myne, I would advise that you stop her. I mentioned this before, but there are many in the temple who do not look well upon pregnant women and families. Delia would be particularly sensitive due to her history in the orphanage, and you would be giving the High Bishop information that would be wise to keep from him. If she

wishes to meet me, I will visit her myself.”

“...That’s true. I’ll tell Mom about that.” After looking at Delia beaming as she picked out clothes, I gave a slow nod and kept browsing the adult men’s section with Fran until eventually Benno strode over.

“So you’re gonna be stuck in the temple all winter, huh?”

“That’s right. I can’t wear cheap clothes in the temple all winter, can I?”

“Of course not. You’re gonna need clothes for relaxing, clothes for when other people visit, pajamas, and clothes for going outside. You’re gonna want to go for some reasonably high-quality underclothes, too. Not to mention thick socks. The temple’s gonna be freezing in the winter.”

“...Bwuuuh. It’s all so expensive. Why do I need to care about how fancy my underclothes are? Nobody’s going to see them, I might as well buy cheap raggedy stuff.” I just wanted to focus on the outside, but Benno’s eyes flared wide with anger.

“Idiot! Don’t let your guard down anywhere! And you’re already sickly as it is. You need to wear as many good layers as you can.”

“So basically, buy as many clothes as I can wear?” I would need several pairs if I was going to wear them on top of each other. That wouldn’t be a problem if I were buying cheap clothes from my usual secondhand shop, but preparing multiple of the same outfit for the temple would be pretty expensive. Yet another blow on my wallet. My winter preparations were going to cost more than anything else.

“You can buy the cloth for your underclothes from my store and have your Mom or Tuuli sew them together. They’re good at that, yeah?”

“Yes, but... I don’t have the funds to buy that many pairs of clothes. Benno, when we get back to your store, please buy five of the books I showed you the other day.” Adding on new pairs of underclothes put me completely over budget.

“I don’t get why you’re not just printing more. You can make as many as you want as long as you’ve got ink and paper, yeah?”

“Aaah, well, we actually only had that one chance to print them.” I hung my head sadly, thinking of my failure. Benno raised a confused eyebrow, and I explained. “When the ink dried, the template curled up and it ended up useless. The art was built on the back of precise cuts, and unlike metal and wood we can’t just wipe off the ink, so once it dries we just can’t use the template anymore...”

It required a large number of pages to make all the picture books. I was planning on printing more if the thirty test books ended up well, but the templates were ruined. It was such a devastating waste of good art I wanted to cry.

“I now know that I have to prepare a bunch of paper and print all the books at once.”

“You can just order some paper from my workshops if you need more, y’know.”

“...No thanks, that’s too expensive. I’ll keep buying the stuff Lutz makes in the Myne Workshop.” I puffed out my cheeks and Benno grinned.

“I TOLD YOU! THAT ONE’S MIIINE!”

Suddenly, we heard Lutz and Gil yelling at each other as they ran through the store. Despite dealing in secondhand clothing, this was still a high-class establishment. Benno’s eyebrow twitched.

“...Myne, go settle them down.”

I walked to where Benno was pointing and found Lutz and Gil engaging in a shouting match. Due to their similar heights, they had ended up wanting the same pair of clothing.

“Gil, Lutz, you’re being too loud. You need to be quiet when you’re in public.” When I finally reached them, they ran up to me holding onto the same pair of clothing they wanted.

“Myne, who do you think this would look better on?! Me, right?!” yelled Lutz.

“No! It’d look better on me! Right, Sister Myne?!” shouted Gil.

They both stomped towards me with terrifying looks on their faces. I looked at the blue jacket in their hands and let out an exaggerated sigh, shaking my hand.

“It wouldn’t look good on either of you,” I said, which neither of them expected. They shut their mouths with their eyes wide.

I wasn’t talking about the design, though. It was just that blue clothing would look especially chilly in the winter, especially given how light their hair was. The jacket would look fine in summer, but not really in winter.

“Remember what Benno told you, Lutz? Some colors look warm, some colors look cold. Which kind of color is this? What kind of color would be good to wear in the cold winter?”

Lutz gasped in realization and let go of the jacket. Gil, still holding it, tilted his head in confusion.

“Gil, you should put that back and try matching this red jacket and brown pants instead. Don’t they look warmer?”

“Alright. I’ll try that.” Gil turned around to put away the blue jacket.

Lutz slumped his shoulders a bit sadly and looked at the clothes I had picked up. The camel-colored jacket seemed thin at first glance, but the raised nap on the inside should make it pretty warm.

“Lutz, these dark-brown pants will definitely look good on you. Then you can match it with either this cam... this yellow jacket or this

green jacket. They're made of different materials, so just pick while keeping in mind you'll be wearing them near your home."

"That only gives me one choice!" Lutz grabbed the camel jacket and glared at me. Green cloth tended to be fairly expensive, so nobody wore green clothing around where we lived.

"Yup. With that in mind, blue would have been even worse for you, right?"

Lutz bit his lip in frustration and put on the jacket. It was a bit big on him, but that was ideal considering he'd be wearing layers and that he'd want it for next year too. The nape on the inside must have been pretty warm, given that his expression immediately softened.

As Lutz settled on his camel jacket, Tuuli came over holding a dress in each hand. "Hey, Myne. Which of these dresses do you think is best?"

One was a deep green dress with vibrant flower embroidery, the other was a simple navy blue dress. Personally, I wanted to see Tuuli wearing a white apron on top of the navy blue dress, kind of like a maid.

"Tuuli, why did you pick these two?"

"This one is cute. Like, the colors and embroidery are just amazing, aren't they? It'll match my hair too, but the other one is really nice and super warm." She had lived a practical life up until now that drew her to the warm navy blue dress, but she actually wanted the deep green dress.

"I think you'll stand out if you wear the cute one, but you can wear a coat over it during the winter. If you always wear something above it, I think you can pick whichever you want. I would go for warmth over cuteness, but you like the cute one more, don't you?"

"Ngggh... This is so haaard!"

In my opinion, buying clothes she liked would be better for her to hone her fashion sense. But it was hard for her to pick fashion over practicality considering her upbringing.

"Sister Myne, I want these clothes!" declared Delia. She came skipping over to me with a pair of cute pink clothes in hand. She even had a warm-looking coat. Very cheeky, making me pay for a coat too. But she looked so happy I didn't feel like commenting on it. Today I was putting my wallet on the line.

"Okay. Consider them yours, Delia."

"I thank you ever so much, Sister Myne. Mmhmmhmm!" Delia let out a happy hum while looking at her clothes with a broad smile, happiness practically radiating off of her. Making her this happy was definitely worth spending a bit extra. I hadn't ever wanted to learn how good it felt to dump money on a cute girl, but it was too late to go back now.

The sight of Delia loving her cute clothes seemed to give Tuuli the inspiration she needed. She thrust out the green dress towards me.

“Myne, I’ll go with the cute one!”

“Okay. You shouldn’t buy a coat here, since it’ll stick out in the neighborhood and at your job. Pick a warm scarf or shawl instead. Plus some for Mom and Dad too.”

“Okay! Thanks, Myne.”



After seeing Tuuli run off happily, I headed over towards Rosina. She had seemingly already picked out her clothes, judging by the rouge dress in her hands, but she was staring at a plain navy blue dress. It was such a plain dress that maybe even Wilma would want to wear it, even though she had said she would rather have art utensils than clothes.

“Rosina, maybe Wilma would want that dress?”

“I would imagine not. She said she did not want any clothes, as she is unable to go outside. She has grown capable of occasionally visiting the workshop, but in that sense she would prefer cheaper clothes that could be dirtied freely. It seems... It seems that the idea of dressing up makes Wilma feel nauseated.”

I thought it was a waste for someone as pretty as Wilma to not dress up, but if she didn't want to, that was that.

“There is no need for you to be upset, Sister Myne. The fact that she now goes to the workshop with the children is immense progress for her.”

Rosina gave a soft smile, and we headed to the counter where Benno was waiting. Along the way we found Fran standing stock still in front of the men's section. Perhaps due to the store's demographic, there were more clothes for adult males than anything else. Fran was completely dumbfounded by all the choices.

“Have you made your decision, Fran?”

“...Sister Myne.” Fran turned around, wearing a rare pitiful expression. He was kinda cute when he was at an utter loss for what to do.

“You have a calm personality, so I think something simple would be best for you. Like this, or this. If you want to be a bit more fashionable, this or this.”

“...At this point, you might as well pick for me, Sister Myne.” Fran's weak tone made Rosina's eyes sparkle. She stepped forward, her chestnut hair bobbing.

“It seems you have your own weakness that you must conquer, Fran.”

“...Rosina,” I said, “I can tell you're enjoying being in charge of Fran for once.”

“I would merely like to be of help to Fran as well.”

“Then I will leave his clothes to you. I've already stated my thoughts.”

“Sister Myne?!” choked out Fran as I left him with Rosina, who was giddy with excitement. I saw everyone's clothes stacked on the counter by Benno, but nobody else was there.

“What? Benno, where's Lutz and the others?”

“Yeah, they were being noisy pains in the neck, so I told them to pick out clothes for you. You’re gonna need at least two or three sets of clothes for your room, not to mention an outfit for formal occasions and an outfit for going out, yeah? Pick whatever you want from what they get, I’m sure it’ll all be good stuff.”

Lutz and Tuuli were in fierce competition since they had tied last time, whereas Delia and Gil were just participating since they were my attendants.

“...Gaaaah. This is going to be so expensive. Clothes for me cost the most, you know.”

“Of course they do, you’re dressing like a noble. People are already ticked that a commoner is wearing blue robes. Don’t make things worse by dressing like a poor person.” Benno’s argument was so right that I couldn’t do anything but hang my head sadly.

As I desperately tried to work out the cost of everything in my head, Tuuli and Lutz brought clothes to the counter while practically gnashing their teeth at each other.

“How are these, Myne?”

They had brought blouses, skirts, and vests made of thick fabric. It seemed that they had looked for things other than dresses due to the lesson they learned last time. Then Delia and Gil brought more clothes on top of that.

“Sister Myne,” said Delia, “these are all really cute.” They set down dresses and tunics. It was important to remember that there weren’t many children’s clothes that were my size. Thus, pretty much every single piece of clothing in the store that fit me was now spread out on the counter.

As I thought about which to pick while all four of them stared holes into me, Fran and Rosina came to the counter as well, having picked out their clothes. When I told them I was picking clothes for myself, they laid down their judgment on one outfit after another.

“These clothes would be best for walking around the temple,” said Rosina.

“There is the Spring Prayer in spring, of course. You will be leaving the city with the High Priest, so you will need clothes of this class to match his. This and this will do,” observed Fran.

Fran and Rosina selected the clothes I would need to live in the temple without any input needed from me. I appreciated having such reliable attendants, but my wallet was in big trouble.

Noooo! I yelled on the inside, at which point Benno gestured Lutz over with a finger before whispering into his ear. Lutz’s expression lit up and he clapped his hands.

“I’ll buy your clothes for you, Myne.”

“Lutz?! Benno, what’d you tell him?!” I glared at Benno, only for

him to snort derisively and look at Lutz with amusement.

“Half of my money’s coming from your inventions, and I never paid you back for helping my family get back in shape,” Lutz said. “It might not be good for friends to lend each other money, but there’s nothing wrong with giving gifts, yeah?”

Lutz puffed out his chest with pride, but this was a bit expensive for a simple gift. Not to mention that not even in my Urano days had I ever experienced a guy buying clothes for me. I faltered, not knowing what to do, and Benno pushed Lutz forward with a grin.

“Turning down a man’s gift in public would shame him for life, Myne. Don’t do that to poor Lutz,” said Benno in a teasing tone, but it was true that rejecting Lutz here would be immensely embarrassing for him. I couldn’t think of any clever ways to gently turn him down. I looked around for help, but Delia just put her hands on her hips and yelled at me.

“Geez! Sister Myne, you just need to accept his gift with a smile. Girls are supposed to let men support them. They actually like that.”

“Delia, please. Shut up.” Putting it like that made me sound like a shallow girl who was just exploiting Lutz. Now it was even harder to accept the gift. I cradled my head in despair, and Lutz tapped my shoulder while showing his guild card.

“Give it up, I already finished paying. Alright?”

...When did Lutz become a social genius?! Share some of that grace with me! Benno was ruffling Lutz’s hair and telling him he did a good job. I couldn’t help but feel his influence over Lutz was growing by the day.

Disappointed in myself for having no social grace despite Rosina giving me a noble’s education, I finished buying clothes for Tuuli and my attendants. My attendants took turns changing into their clothes in the changing room, putting their old clothes into a basket. My clothes were going to stay in the temple, so they split them amongst themselves to pack away.

While everyone’s attention was focused on the clothes, I slid next to Lutz. “Thanks, Lutz. That was a big help. Really.”

“Don’t sweat it. Benno pointed it out to me before.”

It seemed that Benno had pointed out to Lutz that despite the fact we were splitting the profit from the paper, picture books, hangers, and diptychs fifty-fifty, I was always covering the entire initial investment myself.

“He told me not to mention it until you noticed or got stuck in a bind, but I’d say you were definitely in a bind here, yeah?”

...Bwuuuh! I didn’t notice it at all.

And so, I took the equivalent of half of the initial investment funds I had spent from Lutz to buy sheets, cloth for underclothes, and

everything else I would need to have a warm winter. Then, we finished our winter shopping after loading up on winter clothes for the orphans and buying some minor stuff we would need.

Butchering and Absence

The day after we went shopping, the Myne Workshop kids helped us carry the goods Benno ordered to the temple. The kids, wearing their new thick clothing, piled the goods on newly purchased carts and traveled between the orphanage and the Gilberta Company. Half of it went to my chambers, but a lot of it was for the orphanage too. They were also bringing in tools that would be used for the pig butchering.

“Take out the goods here and give anything for the director chambers to Gil. Then take firewood and food to the basement of the girls’ building, and take firewood and tools to the basement of the boys’ building.”

Fran checked the contents of each cart as it arrived and directed where they were to be brought. They weren’t spread equally since the girls’ building had the kitchen, whereas the boys’ basement had been turned into the Myne Workshop. Wilma was managing the preserved food, and managed the key that kept the door to it locked. Everybody would suffer if the orphanage ran out of food midway through winter.

The gray priests and shrine maidens were taking the goods to their respective basements, and the children were helping while chattering excitedly. Lutz started to speak while watching them.

“My family said they’d help with the orphanage’s pig butchering too. Dad hasn’t come out and said it, but I think he kinda feels like he owes the High Priest.”

Despite the fact that Deid was stubborn and tight-lipped, it seemed that he was grateful to the High Priest for providing him with an opportunity to talk things out.

“But like, the High Priest’s a noble, yeah? There’s not much we can give him as thanks. So Dad’s gonna help the orphanage instead. One thing led to another, and now my whole family’s helping.”

“Your whole family... Isn’t Deid going a bit too far?”

Lutz’s immediate family consisted almost entirely of men, which would be a big help here, but I was a little worried about whether or not everyone would be enthusiastic about helping the orphanage.

“Don’t sweat it. My brothers didn’t seem worried, and Mom was all for helping too.”

“I think things might just go well with your family helping, Lutz. Now I’m looking forward to the pig butchering!” I gave a happy laugh,

but Lutz just looked at me with a grimace.

“Why do you think you’re going too? You always get sick around this time of year, and last time you got a fever in the cart and had to be rushed back to the gate. No way are we gonna bring you to a butchering filled with newbies.”

“Th-That makes sense, but... my mom’s pregnant and I’ll be a big sister next year, so I wanted to participate this time for sure so I could learn how it works.”

I felt like I could finally dig out an animal’s guts without crying at the sight of the bloody corpse, and yet they were saying I couldn’t go at all. It was too cruel. I had even planned to go so that I could learn to help the neighborhood butcher a pig when the time came.

“It’s not gonna happen. You wouldn’t be able to work there with the orphanage people around, anyway. And you’d get a fever for sure if you watched us work outside all day. How’re you gonna make the, uh, hide glue stuff if you’re sick?” Lutz listed off reason after reason why I couldn’t go. The sad thing was I couldn’t argue at all.

“You’re staying home, Myne. Use that time to figure out how to fix your money problems. This is like, uuuh, what was it you said? The right person for the right job?”

“I’ve dug my own grave...”

On the morning of the pig butchering day, my family and Lutz’s family gathered at the well to talk things over. Things ended with me, Dad, and Tuuli heading to the orphanage. That way they could get me to where I was staying while Dad and Tuuli organized the orphans, got what they needed from the orphanage, and led them to the butchering grounds.

Lutz headed to the meat store as an apprentice of the Gilberta Company and then went to the farming town with the butchers, while his mom and my mom went to the town first to prepare the smoking building, draw water, and so on.

“Now then, please split into your groups and begin today’s work. The butcher group will push the carts and depart. The home group will clean the temple and orphanage, then prepare soup for dinner.”

Fran split those in the orphanage into two groups. All adult gray priests were participating in the butchering, excluding a few to watch over the kids.

“Dad, be sure to bring back all the pig skin for me. I need it for the hide glue. I can survive without the bones or organs, but the skin is absolutely vital. Do everything you can to get it.” I emphasized how important to me the skin was, and Dad patted my head while grinning.

“Yeah, you got it. Just sit nice and pretty in your room for me.

Make sure not to get sick, too. Lutz said you've got some important work to do after this, yeah?"

"I know. That's why I'm staying here even though I really wanna go with you guys." Having said everything I wanted to Dad, I headed to the carts where Tuuli and the orphans were piling equipment.

"Tuuli, take care of Delia for me."

"Uh huh. We'll work hard together." Tuuli smiled at Delia, who raised her eyebrows and glared at me.

"Sister Myne, why do I have to go with them?!"

"I want you to see the world outside of the temple."

Rosina and Wilma were staying at the temple with me, while every other attendant of mine was going to the butchering. Delia hated it, but she didn't have an option here. I wasn't making her go to the orphanage or anything, and now was a good time for her to bond with the other kids. She barely interacted with them otherwise, but she had gotten along with Tuuli while shopping, so I couldn't imagine her ending up alone. Especially with Gil and Fran around.

"Myne," said Tuuli, "what are you going to do while we're gone?"

"Make new picture books. Rosina and Wilma will be there to help me. They both have pretty handwriting, and I need Wilma to draw the art for me."

Rosina was my harspiel teacher first and foremost, but everyone who saw her handwriting complimented her on how beautiful it was, which made her the perfect candidate for helping me with the next picture book. Since all my male attendants were leaving, Wilma would be coming to my chambers to help. While she was at it, she would bring two girls skilled at cooking to train them in the kitchen in preparation for winter.

Rosina and I went back to my chambers after seeing everybody off. We practiced the harspiel for a bit, then Wilma arrived with the two girls.

"Now then, Nicola, Monika. Please study well so that you might learn to cook delicious food." After giving them encouragement, I directed Rosina to take them to the kitchen.

"Sister Myne," began Wilma, "as most blue priests are absent during the Harvest Festival, divine gifts will be quite lacking. Many priests bring their chefs with them, and some of those who remain will cook unsatisfactory meals due to knowing that their master will not be eating them. The following ten days would have been beyond miserable if we could not make soup for ourselves."

Wilma's words sent a shudder down my spine. Given the shortage of blue priests, I would be the only blue robe at the temple for the entire duration of the Harvest Festival. Everyone else had been sent to some farm town or another. If they all brought their chefs with them,

there would be no divine gifts for the orphanage.

“There used to be many more blue priests,” continued Wilma, “such that half would leave and the divine gifts would only be diminished by half, and the remaining chefs would not be lazy so as to not embarrass their master in front of the other blue priests. But as it is now...”

She sighed and lowered her gaze. She then gently opened her brown eyes and looked at me with her usual peaceful smile. “We are able to provide for ourselves thanks to you, Sister Myne. We no longer have to sit and do nothing as children starve beneath us. You have my eternal gratitude for preparing the orphanage for winter. If there is anything I can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask.”

With that said, Wilma climbed to the second floor and immediately began spreading her art utensils on the table. “Is this your next story?”

“Yes, it’s called Cinderella.” I readied my harspiel and began practicing as Wilma read the story. I had my third practice song to master, as well as another song of my own creation. My personal song this time was the classic German song *The Fox That Stole The Goose*, known in Japan as *Kogitsune*, meaning fox cub. I had technically replaced the fox with a rabbit to match the local wildlife, but don’t worry about that.

“It has been a long time since I have heard music,” mused Wilma.

“Can you play a harspiel as well, Wilma?”

“On an amateur level. You are so familiar with Rosina’s music that it would be an offense on your ears to hear me play,” said Wilma with a smile, but she was no doubt better than me. I was still a complete beginner.

“Rosina is so good I have to question what exactly an amateur level is. I would appreciate hearing you play, so that I might have a better idea.”

“It is truly nothing special, I assure you.” So she said, but she was clearly happy to have the opportunity to play music again. She took the large harspiel Rosina played with a blissful expression on her face.

The music that flowed off the plucked strings reflected Wilma’s personality well, carrying with it a soft and pleasant tone. When mixed with Wilma’s gentle voice singing a lullaby, it literally came close to putting me to sleep.

“Your music is as soft as always, Wilma,” observed Rosina.

“Perhaps that is because I lack your talents and choose slower songs when available?”

As I listened to their friendly chat, I found myself floored by just how much talent was expected from me. If Wilma was an amateur, then noble children must all be professional musicians.

“...Would it be fair to assume,” I ventured, “that this means you are good at art as well, Rosina?”

“I learned as much as I was taught, shall we say.” Considering how good Wilma’s “amateur” music was, I could guess that Rosina was a skilled artist as well. The degree to which Christine’s attendants were trained showed just how abnormal of a shrine maiden she really was.

Harspiel practice ended at third bell and we moved on to Cinderella. Now that Wilma had finished reading it, we could discuss which illustrations to put in it.

“It will be difficult to properly represent Cinderella’s beauty, I believe. Having only one color to use for the skin is quite a shame,” observed Wilma.

“Is the skin so important? Could we not make the stepmother and stepsisters ugly in shape and size?” I asked.

“That wouldn’t do. Any woman fit to be a mednoble’s second wife must be beautiful.”

The stepmother and stepsisters were meant to contrast with Cinderella’s beauty. I would rather reality not be brought into it. As I fell into thought, Rosina looked over the story and made a suggestion.

“Sister Myne, would it not be better to simply remake the template for the children’s bible, rather than worry over this new story? I believe it is still too early for you to write stories about the nobility. At the very least, it would be best for you to grow more accustomed to the ways of the temple first.”

The High Priest’s criticism was harsh enough, but now even Rosina was pointing out that I was painfully ignorant of noble society.

“I mean, personally, I would like to get Cinderella made so I can see whether people will accept a normal story.”

“Sister Myne, that is something you cannot say until you know how to write a normal story in the first place.” Rosina shook her head as Wilma chided her for being too harsh. Which meant, in other words, Wilma didn’t think Cinderella was a normal story either.

“...Is Cinderella not a normal story?”

“A normal story is about the founding of a kingdom, about knights, or about the gods. I have never heard of a story like this Cinderella before,” said Rosina. It seemed that all the stories she had heard under Christine’s tutelage had been expressed through art. Art, music, and even poetry based on the stories, in other words. I would need to learn more about that before I could write a picture book that would be accepted by the nobility.

“Between the children’s bible and Cinderella, which do you think the nobility would be more likely to accept?”

“The children’s bible. It is knowledge essential for any child to know, and it is composed in a very easy to understand way.” The firmness of Rosina’s reply convinced me to abandon Cinderella. Making a book that might not be accepted wouldn’t be wise when I could make one guaranteed to sell well instead.

“In that case, I will give up on Cinderella. We can craft another children’s bible instead. Rosina, would you tell me those normal stories of yours later? I would like to make them into picture books.”

“They are necessary for your education regardless. I will gladly tell them whenever you wish.”

We took one children’s bible apart and split the pages in half to separate the text from the art. We then placed the art on top of the thick paper that we were going to use for Cinderella’s template and cut out the black parts. That should result in art identical to what we had before. Rosina and Wilma got right to work cutting out the art once they got Lutz’s precision knife from the workshop.

“Sister Myne, please cut out the letters as you did last time.” Rosina offered me a job with a smile, and I nodded. She had quickly learned that I lacked the precision necessary to cut out the detailed art.

...Rosina might be way better at cutting out pretty lines, but that’s just because my hands are small. I’ll be super dexterous when I grow up! I pretended not to remember that in my Urano days I had been clumsy all the way into adulthood.

The orphanage’s dinner was finished before sixth bell. Nicola and Monika left the kitchen looking exhausted, having cooked in a kitchen large-scale for the first time. Rosina sent the chefs on their way after informing them that the food would be taken to the orphanage once Fran returned.

“...They seem to be late,” said Rosina.

“Pig butchering takes a lot of time. They will likely be arriving back just as sixth bell rings and the gates begin to close,” I replied while looking out the window. The sky was gradually darkening as the sun fell. In past years where my family waited until it was colder to butcher pigs with the neighborhood, they hadn’t gotten home until the sun had completely set. It would still be a bit until they got back.

Which was the thought on my mind when Delia arrived back at my chambers, out of breath. Perhaps due to running back or perhaps due to the cold, her cheeks were as red as apples.

“Welcome back, Delia. Did you get a lot of meat?”

“Of course! Winter won’t even be a problem with that much meat.”

I had been worried about Delia, so I let out a sigh of relief when

she came back in high spirits. She had returned first to get me changed while everyone else carried the butchered pig meat to the cellar. Delia raved about how sausage was made and the different kinds of cutting techniques of the butchers while she changed me.

“Then we took a bunch of the pickled meat we had in the orphanage and hung it upside down to get smoked. It’s so weird that smoking makes it last longer. And then...” It seemed that Delia going outside and participating in the butchering with everyone had been good for her. If this marked the beginning of her spending time with the other kids, I couldn’t be happier.

“Sister Myne,” called Fran from the first floor. “Lutz said he would like to talk to you about the pig skin. Would you be able to visit the workshop when you are changed?” As I had already changed, I went down the stairs immediately.

“Gil, please guide Sister Myne there.”

“Sure.”

On the way to the workshop, I could see everyone carrying meat from the carts next to the temple gates down to the basement of the girls’ building. Dad and Tuuli were mixed into the crowd too. Holding back the urge to run over and join them, I walked inside the workshop.

“Myne, what should we do with all the skin?” said Lutz the second he saw me, pointing at the bundles of skin they had. I looked around the orphanage, then pointed at a bucket.

“You can go ahead and put it in there.”

“We don’t need to do anything to it first?”

“We’ll need to put it in lime water to get the hair out, but I don’t know how long it needs to soak. Someone will need to watch it, and it’s a bit late for that now.”

“I don’t even wanna think about wasting this skin,” said Lutz while he took out his diptych. He then glanced at me with his stylus in hand. That was my sign to start explaining.

“First, soak the skin in lime water to get rid of the hair, then peel the inner skin off from the outer skin, which we’ll use for tanning later. You’ve done this before, right Lutz?”

“I’m not too good at it, though.” Lutz shrugged and nodded me on.

“Only the inner layer is necessary for the hide glue, so I was thinking we could tan the outer layer and use it as book covers.”

“And who’s gonna tan the leather?” Lutz glared at me just like Benno might.

“...Ummm, we could ask a leather workshop?”

“Hope you have the money for it.” He was hitting me where it hurt, so I pretended not to hear him and continued.

“You then soak the inner layer in even more lime water, leave it there until it’s soft and swollen, which will get the (proteins), fats, and so on out. That happens on its own, so you can just let it sit. Then, in order to clean the lime water, wash off the hide and boil the water over a small fire for about two bells.”

“Two bells? That’s pretty long,” replied Lutz as he ran his stylus over his diptych.

“This is where things get hard. If you let the water sit at a warmth that’s just warm enough to drink, kinda like tea, the impurities will rise and fall, leaving the center clear. We want to use that clear center.” I paused, and Lutz looked up from his diptych, confused.

“...How are we gonna use just the center part?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s see where trial and error gets us.”

“Seriously? Guess we better use a smaller pot, then.”

I knew it would be possible to just remove the impurities off the top, but at the moment I couldn’t answer how to do it or how far to go. “Anyway, pour the hide glue liquid into a wood box, set it somewhere that the cold winter wind will hit it, and done. Once it’s solid, we have our hide glue.”

“Hmm. There’s so much time boiling and soaking that we’ll probably be able to make the candles along with it,” concluded Lutz as he looked over his diptych. “Alright. We’ll make the hide glue and candles tomorrow. We can finish all the stinky work in one go.”

“Sounds good! Let’s get this over with.” I shot my hand in the air, excited to be making hide glue for the first time.

The End of Winter Preparations

I wanted to finish all of the stinky work in one go, before the blue priests returned. Lutz said that he would make the hide glue and candles today, along with some cheese on the side.

At my place we only ever made cottage cheese by adding vinegar to milk we bought from someone who raised cows, but Lutz's family got lots of milk through trading eggs and thus made fermented natural cheese.

"That's what the orphanage is gonna want, right? It lasts longer," said Lutz.

"...I dunno what that cheese stuff is," replied Gil, "but the more food the better."

I watched Lutz and Gil chat as they worked. It had taken me a while to get to the workshops since I had harspiel practice until third bell, but it seemed that work had been going fine without me. The workshop was filled with some priests and apprentices doing work at Fran's instruction. As I rarely got the chance to see the workshop when it was operational due to normally helping the High Priest with paperwork around now, it was fun for me to look around.

"Lutz, Gil, how's it coming along?"

"Pretty good for now. The pig hides are over here, the candles are getting made over there. We're in the middle of cleaning off the meat scraps from the filtered wax. We haven't done that, uh, salt thing yet."

The pot beside Lutz and Gil already had the peeled inner layers of the hides in the lime water. They must have just put them there recently, as they were far from swollen. There were three gray priests filtering melted cow fat in the direction where Lutz pointed.

"The hides will need to be here for a bit longer. (Salting out) the wax is kind of tedious, but it's better than having stinky candles and the oil's better, so I hope you keep up with it."

Apparently, Lutz's family didn't know about salting out either. My family started doing it since it actually did make the candles smell less bad, but it wasn't really a thing around here. It was probably due to the fact that I lived in the poor part of the city, and although salt was cheaper than spices, it still wasn't cheap itself.

"If you chop up smimosa and demple herbs into really small bits and mix them with the melted wax, it'll get rid of most of the smell. But don't use gierecht or redrum herbs, no matter what. That'll just

make them more stinky. Be careful.”

After I explained how to make the candles smell less like wild animals, Lutz blinked in surprise, then cackled with his shoulders shaking. “Yeah, I remembered when you messed those candles up.”

“Ngh... Failure is the mother of invention, okay? Success is born from the midst of countless failures!”

“Huh, that makes sense. You’re pretty smart, Sister Myne!” Gil nodded over and over at my platitudes, his eyes shining with sincere admiration. *My attendants sure are cuties. I hope he’ll always be this sweet.*

“By the way, Sister Myne. What’s that salt stuff about, anyway? Is it hard?”

“It’s annoying to do since it makes things take longer, but it’s not hard. You add it to salt water and boil it over low heat for a bit, repeatedly removing the scum that arises. When it cools down, you will be left with the hardened oil on top and the salt water on bottom. Once it’s completely white and solid, you drain the water beneath it and use the pure oil that remains.”

I explained the process as briefly as I could, getting fervent nods in reply. Lutz was also nodding while listening, but then he blinked after having a sudden realization. “Hey, Myne. Don’t we need to use some of this fat for soap?”

“We get that from divine gifts, so we’ll be fine using all of this for candles.” At our homes we left out a share of the oil to make soap in the spring, but in the temple we were given soap as divine gifts. It was important for gray priests to keep their clothes and bodies clean, so we were actually given quite a lot of it. Those in the orphanage would much prefer food to soap, but blue priests had different priorities.

“Oh, and Gil. I imagine that the cloth they’re using to filter that fat will have plenty of tiny meat chunks stuck to it. Please tell the gray priests that tonight’s soup will taste a lot better if they put those into it.”

Gil nodded hard and ran over to the filtering priests. They opened up the cloth and peered inside, leading to a cry of excitement loud enough for me to hear.

“Yeah, meat’s pretty good,” said Lutz with a laugh.

I smiled at him, then turned to look around the workshop. Hide glue and candles weren’t the only things being made. There were gray priests and apprentices getting oil from fruit using the pressure tools meant for squeezing water out of fresh paper on the draining bed. We naturally wanted a lot of oil since it could be used for both lamps and cooking. The orphanage usually only made soup for food, though, so none of the oil would actually be used in the kitchen.

Paper, the usual focus of the workshop, was shoved into the

corner. I could see paper in the process of having its water drained, plus white and black bark left out to dry. My eyes fell on the stacks of completed paper.

“Hey, Lutz. How much paper has the workshop finished right now?”

Lutz followed where I was looking and narrowed his eyes. “Since we just printed all those picture books, I’m guessing three hundred pages at best. Probably less. Not sure exactly how many since there’s still a lot of them drying. What, you need some?”

“Mhm. I wanted to print a second wave of the children’s bibles, but I need to make them all at once since the templates go bad. I want to make as many as possible in one go. So... how much paper could you make if you started now?” We needed a lot of paper and ink to make sure the templates weren’t wasted. I could order linseed oil from Benno to make more ink, and we still had plenty of soot lying around. The problem was paper.

“Volrin wood’s not too good for firewood, and it’s about time for the bark to start hardening up, so there should be a good amount at the lumber yard. I’ll go check later. We should be able to make seven hundred and fifty sheets if we use all the white and black bark we have here.”

“Okay. Try and make as much as you can, okay?”

“Leave it to me.” Lutz was willing to make the paper, and that was fine with me. “Myne, want to go check out the cheese while the hides are swelling up?” asked Lutz. I nodded, and we moved to the girls’ building while Fran continued to handle things at the workshop.

“You’re making cheese in the girls’ building?”

“Yeah, with their pots. You don’t want us mixing the pots for making paper with the pots for making cheese, right?”

Personally, I didn’t want the pots we boiled ashes and bark in to be used for preparing food, but there were a surprisingly large number of people around here who didn’t feel the same way as long as the pots were washed. Most were fine with a little bit of ash getting potentially mixed into their food. I could stomach that, but I would rather not. Plus, the orphanage kids were used to eating food left over by nobles, so if we had enough pots to keep things separate we might as well.

“It’s finished!”

“Begin drying these, then.”

When we arrived at the girls’ building, the children were drying the fruit and the mushrooms they had gotten in the forest while shrine maidens and apprentice shrine maidens made cheese and soup, plus jam by boiling some of the aforementioned fruits with honey. The sweet scent in the air was entirely unlike the beastly animal scent in

the boys' building.

"It's funny to think that even though we're making this much soup, it'll all be gone by lunch."

"I wish the Harvest Festival would be over already. Making soup over and over all day is such a pain."

The chefs were extra busy since we were getting fewer divine gifts from the blue priests now, a situation which demanded almost twice as much soup as normal. I couldn't help but smile as I saw the girls chopping vegetables with pursed lips and stirring pots with exaggerated frowns.

"S-Sister Myne!" Upon noticing me, the kids hurriedly stopped working to cross their arms in front of their chests and kneel. I told them to continue on like normal, and they all resumed work looking much more tense than before.

...Aaaah! They're super scared of me.

The priests in the workshop were mostly used to my presence given that I often popped in to discuss things with Lutz or watch over their work. But I basically never came to see the soup being made, so it was clear that everyone was tense and shaky.

"I came to see how the cheese-making is coming along, at the advice of Lutz. How is it going?"

"The milk has only just gotten warm." A girl smiled awkwardly while gently stirring a pot with a large wooden spatula. Lutz peered into the pot and gave a nod.

"Going slow with the warming's exactly what we want. Call me once little bubbles start popping up." Lutz must have been able to calculate how much time was left based on the pot and the fire, as he murmured "This should be alright" before heading over to the kids drying fruit.

"Hey, shorties. We've gotta go get some stuff from the store. Finish up here and come to the workshop when you're ready. There's a lot of stuff being delivered there, so we gotta start getting it now before it all piles up."

The children gave hearty replies and stopped drying the fruit to clean up their baskets instead.

"You should go back to your room, Myne. Everyone'll just be nervous with you around."

"Of course. Thanks for doing all this." I returned to my chambers, pleased at how well everything was going. At this rate we would easily finish before the blue priests returned. And once the smelly work was done, we were free to take our time.

Work was going on in the kitchen of my chambers as well. Alongside my normal meals, the chefs were extremely busy salting the slices of pork that were too thin to be smoked and cooking them confit

style to preserve them.

I climbed the stairs while watching the busy kitchen out of the corner of my eye, and once in my room I saw Delia reading a children's bible to practice her letters while Rosina faced the work left to her by Fran.

"Shall we continue making the template?" I thought about starting my own work, but Fran held out a wooden board with a smile.

"Perhaps later, Sister Myne. I believe it would be best to study your prayers, so that you will be ready whenever the Knight's Order might call for aid."

Naturally, the Knight's Order was composed of nobles. No failure, however minor, would be permitted if they called upon the temple for aid. It was easy to see why Fran would be more worried about being summoned by the Knight's Order than preparing the orphanage for winter.

"...When will they be summoning us?"

"There is no set date, but every year they request aid once or twice before winter begins, so the summons should be arriving soon."

"I see..."

Under normal circumstances, an apprentice would never participate in a ritual. They were too important to be carried out by inexperienced apprentices, which was why I hadn't participated in any baptism ceremonies, adulthood ceremonies, or the Starbind Ceremony. Furthermore, the Knight's Order was mostly male and tended not to enlist the help of blue shrine maidens for fear of illicit rumors.

A summons from the Order was meant to enlist blue priests for a ritual. And yet, since there weren't any blue priests in the temple to perform the ritual, I had to step up to the task despite normally being the last person who would be picked for the job.

"But Fran, I don't get it. Doesn't the High Priest have a lot of mana?" I wasn't the only one with a lot of mana. As far as I knew, the High Priest had more mana than the rest of the blue priests combined, and then some.

"There are times and situations where he will need to prioritize his duty as a noble over his temple duties."

It seemed that the Knight's Order was experiencing a noble shortage just like the temple. And just like the temple, many of the talented knights had been summoned to the Sovereignty, resulting in a situation where nobles with mana far below par were being allowed to join the Order. In the midst of all that, the High Priest was an excellent noble that had graduated from the Royal Academy, and thus it was possible that he would be so busy supporting the Order that I would need to do my job as shrine maiden. All of this information

came from Fran, who conveyed it all furtively.

...Wait, my first real job as a shrine maiden is going to be a joint mission with a platoon of knights? Isn't it a bit too much to ask? I chanted the prayers with a cold sweat running down my back, until Fran suddenly realized something and looked up.

“...Sister Myne, how are your ceremonial robes coming along?”

“They’ve finished the temporary stitching and begun the primary stitching, so it shouldn’t be too long.” I had been told that it would take four days if Corinna remained in good health, and ten at the absolute worst. I passed that on to Fran, who sighed in relief.

“In that case, please bring them to the temple as soon as possible, so that you may leave the moment the summons arrives.”

I returned to practicing my prayers with Fran, and eventually Gil came over carrying a box. It was apparently a delivery from the Gilberta Company.

“Could I get some help, Fran?” called out Gil from the first floor. “There’s some big boxes over there.”

“Certainly. I will be there at once. Delia, Rosina, please begin opening the boxes. Sister Myne, please stay where you are and continue practicing.” Fran stood up to answer Gil’s call and went downstairs with Rosina and Delia. The two girls opened the boxes placed in the hall while Gil and Fran went to get the rest from the workshop.

“Yes! The rugs are finally here!” I could hear Delia’s happy cry echo up the stairs, reminding me once again how much she liked decorating and redecorating my room. “Now we can prepare the chambers for winter. If you’ll excuse me, I need to start redecorating...”

“Delia, it is almost time to eat. Let us wait to redecorate until after we’ve eaten.” Rosina stopped Delia’s rampage before it could begin by postponing the redecoration until after lunch.

“Now then, Sister Myne, please go with Gil to the workshop or someplace else.” After lunch, Delia drove me out of my room with a smile.

Since the High Priest was absent, I couldn’t enter the book room even with Fran. That left the workshop as the only place I could go. And since Delia said that she needed Fran’s help, Gil was the one accompanying me there.

“Lutz asked me before lunch to go check on the hides and see if they’re swollen yet. Let’s go check’m out, Sister Myne.”

The orphanage was still in the middle of eating, judging by how the workshop was completely empty. There was nobody to stop me, so I just went ahead and peered into the pots.

“Looks like they’re good now. Once we wash them to get the lime off, start the boiling.”

“...Huh? Myne, what’re you doing here?” Lutz, having finished lunch at Benno’s (and thereby having finished giving Benno his report), blinked in surprise after seeing me in the workshop. It was rare for me to visit the workshop multiple times in one day, since I wasn’t allowed to participate in the work myself.

“The Gilberta Company sent over rugs today, remember? Delia’s head over heels excited to redecorate, so... she kinda kicked me out.”

“Huh. Well, that’s convenient. Master Benno told me to tell you that your robes are done and to visit Corinna when you can. Why not go now, if you can’t be in your room? I’ll drop by to get you on my way home,” suggested Lutz, and I nodded. It would be dangerous for me to just stand around outside on a cold autumn day. Benno’s store would be a safe refuge for me.

“I like that idea. I’ll take Rosina with me to Corinna’s, so could you bring Fran with you when you come get me? I won’t make Rosina go back on her own.”

“Alright.”

“Lutz, you go wash the hides,” added Gil. “I’ll take Sister Myne to her chambers.”

I returned to my chambers with Gil, only for Delia to yell a hearty “Geez!” at me since they had already started moving furniture. It seemed that messy chambers were a disgrace, and for that reason masters must not return until the redecorating is finished.

“I just heard they finished my ceremonial robes. I’ll be going to the Gilberta Company now, and then I will go straight home. You’ll at least have to let me get changed first. Also, Rosina, could you accompany me to Corinna’s?”

“Of course, Sister Myne.” Rosina left to get changed into her outside clothes, and Delia changed me while excitedly informing me that the redecorating would be finished by tomorrow.

“Sorry, Fran, but Lutz will be dropping by later to take you to the store. I just couldn’t bear to send Rosina back alone so late in the day.”

“Understood. Until tomorrow, Sister Myne. I humbly await your return.”

After Fran saw us off, I walked down the chilly city streets with Rosina, who was wearing her freshly purchased rouge outfit. Fran often walked me home or to the Gilberta Company, and Gil often went to the forest, but Rosina rarely had the opportunity to walk outside. The way she was peering around curiously despite having to scrunch up her nose at the smell was very cute.

“You know,” I began, “I think Wilma’s art would improve if she

walked outside like this.”

“She might develop the courage to do just that sooner or later. It wasn’t too long ago that she trembled in fear from afar whenever a gray priest drew water for our soup, and now she is giving them instructions.”

It seemed that Wilma was conquering her fears bit by bit now that she had been entrusted with the orphanage and its children. I was glad to hear reports of Wilma’s growth through Rosina.

“Hi, Mark. I’m here because Benno called for me.”

“The master is presently in a business meeting. If you would wait here for a moment, I will go contact Corinna directly.”

I sat in the chair offered to me by Mark, and Rosina slid into position behind me. An apprentice brought me tea at Mark’s instruction. I drank it and took a deep breath.

“Lady Myne, please follow me.” Mark addressed me as “Lady Myne” since I had Rosina with me and I was visiting Corinna as a customer. We left the store and climbed the outside stairs to the third floor.

“Corinna, Lady Myne has arrived.”

“Hello there, sweetie.” Corinna greeted me with a dreamy smile after Mark opened the door for her. Her eyes then widened in surprise after falling on Rosina. “Oh, you’ve brought an attendant with you? Should I call you Lady Myne, then?”

“It doesn’t matter to me, but it does to Rosina, so maybe you should.”

“Aha. In that case, Lady Myne, please follow me.” She guided me to the usual parlor, and there I found my ceremonial robes hung on a clothing rack, spread out wide in front of me.

“Wow!” She had positioned the rack such that light streaming from the window hit the robes, which brought out the seasonal flowers and the wavy embroidery, which had been sewn with the same color thread as the cloth. The light actually made the embroidery with its little sparkles of white thread look like water, so much so that I found myself at a loss for words.

“...It’s splendid.” Rosina’s breathless praise brought me back to my senses.

“Corinna, this really is beautiful. I thank you ever so much.”

“Why, I must thank you myself.” Corinna held down her slowly growing belly with one hand while gently removing the robes from the rack.

“Please, try them on. Forgive me, miss, but could you please help? It is a bit hard for me to move with a belly this large.”

“But of course.” Rosina took the blue robes from Corinna and put

them on me. She was fast and efficient, which made sense given that she served another blue shrine maiden before me.

The robes had been dyed completely blue, with embroidery of the same color. The sleeves and hem were lined with silver, and there was fancy gold embroidery beneath the neck. On top of that, the crest of the Myne Workshop was embroidered with gold in the center of the outfit when viewed from the front.

I stood in place, frozen by anxiety. I felt like a bride wearing her wedding dress or something. I had to act graceful and elegant. I couldn't let them get dirty at all. It felt like the clothes were wearing me, and demanding that I live to suit them.

"Here is the sash." It seemed that sashes for ceremonial clothes differed based on age; apprentices had white sashes with silver embroidery, while adults had white sashes with gold embroidery. Corinna explained that the embroidery contained words of prayer from the bible.

"Excuse me, but this cloth seems to be exceptionally heavy...?" Rosina looked up at Corinna as she wrapped the sash around me, and Corinna gave an explanation with her bright smile not faltering for an instant.

"If you sew multiple layers of cloth into the robes ahead of time, they can grow along with Lady Myne. I fashioned them in this way after learning the techniques she described to me. It was a risk, but surely one that will be beneficial for ceremonial robes that she will rarely use."

"...You surprise me as always, Sister Myne." Rosina let out an awed murmur after Corinna explained that she had made the robes at my instructions, rather than devising them on her own.

Rosina then stood up, having finished dressing me, and gave a firm nod after looking me over from every angle. "This robe truly is splendid. Every time you move, it reveals more of the flowers and water, and they will surely draw the attention of all those around you."

Rosina had served Sister Christine and still gave these robes her utmost approval. Corinna, having been tense about using a new technique on such important robes, visibly relaxed.

I had my ceremonial robes and my chambers were being redecorated for winter. We had preserved our food, made candles, and stored them both in cellars with firewood.

The hide glue was placed in an area where cool wind blew, and the workshop was hard at work making paper and ink for our second round of printing.

And finally, we knew what tools we needed for winter handiwork

and they were all being bought.

The orphanage's winter preparations were more or less complete.

Summons from the Knight's Order

The time for the Harvest Festival ended and the blue priests returned to the temple. I hadn't seen them arrive myself, but I could indirectly tell by the increased amount of divine gifts in the orphanage.

The High Priest had been sent to a relatively close town and thus returned quickly compared to the other blue priests, which meant that I was back to helping him again every day after third bell.

"High Priest, I finished the math on these sheets." Just like usual, I was blasting through the math the High Priest assigned to me.

I looked up after finishing a stack of sheets, just in time to see a white bird flying straight towards the window. "Oh no! It's going to hit the window!" I cried on instinct, only for the white bird to pass right through the glass and do a loop inside the room. It flapped down to the High Priest's desk and folded its wings politely.

"B-Bwuh?! What's going on?!" I was panicking with wide eyes, but everyone else here seemed to know what the bird was all about. The High Priest's attendants were eyeing it with only a little caution.

"Be quiet, Myne." The High Priest chastised me as he touched the bird, and the moment he did, a male voice began to speak from the bird's mouth.

"Ferdinand, the Knight's Order calls for the temple to perform its duty. Prepare to set out at once." The message was repeated thrice, then the bird disappeared into thin air and dropped a yellow stone onto the table.

The High Priest took out a shining baton-looking thing from somewhere and lightly hit the stone while murmuring something. The stone immediately began growing in size with its shape twisting, until moments later it looked like the same white bird as before.

"Understood," spoke the High Priest at the bird with a wave of his baton, and in turn the bird spread its wings wide. It then flew out of the window through the glass just like it had when entering the room.

...*Wow! So fantasy!* I wiggled with excitement at the magic the High Priest had just performed, only for him to glare at me. That made me realize that the previously still attendants had stopped working and begun cleaning up, preparing for something.

"Myne, the Knight's Order calls upon us! Get changed into your ceremonial robes and head to the Noble's Gate at once!"

The High Priest looked so serious that I replied with an enthusiastic “Yes sir!” even though I had no idea where the Noble’s Gate was. “...Um, where is the Noble’s Gate?”

“I will guide you,” said Fran as he did the cross-armed salute to the High Priest, then he picked me up before immediately leaving the High Priest’s room. He strode quickly down the halls.

“Sister Myne, have you memorized the ritual prayer?” asked Fran, and I nodded while clinging to his shoulder.

“Delia, Rosina! Prepare the ceremonial robes at once!” The moment Fran opened my door, he let out a loud shout unlike anything I had heard from him before. He didn’t stop moving as he yelled, either. He strode right up the stairs at high speed. Upon arriving on the second floor, he set me down, turned around, and sped back down the stairs.

Delia ran up to me with the robes and set them on the table before immediately starting to take off the blue robes I was wearing.

“B-Bwuh?!”

“Geez! Please stay still!” Delia’s blue eyes glared at me hard after I reeled from the abnormal intensity of her undressing.

While I froze in place, stunned by how much of a rush everyone was in, Delia slid the ceremonial robes onto me. Rosina began tying the sash while I was getting my arms through the sleeves. Delia went and got a yellowish strap of cloth, which Rosina tied around my sash as further decoration.

...Have they rehearsed this? 'Cause I mean, wow.

Just as Rosina finished tying the sash, Delia pulled out my hair stick in one smooth motion. Rosina sat me onto a nearby chair before my hair even had time to finish falling down.

“Sister Myne, you will be dealing with the Knight’s Order. No matter what happens, you must not allow any displeasure to show on your face.” As Rosina stood behind me and brushed my hair, Delia took the fancy hair stick I wore at my baptism out of the closet.

“Sister Myne, please wear this one.”

I took the hair stick and bundled up my hair like usual.

“Sister Myne is ready!” called Delia, and Fran immediately rushed up the stairs. He was wearing a pouch on his waist, and he set the tools he had been using in the High Priest’s room for work onto the table.

“Rosina, please put these away. Forgive me, Sister Myne, but we must hurry,” said Fran, and he picked me up once again and strode out of my chambers.

“Fran, where is the Noble’s Gate?”

“It is located at the back of the noble area of the temple. It connects to the Noble’s Quarter and is used for blue priests returning

home or entering the Noble's Quarter on church business."

Considering that I had been taking long detours around the noble area of the temple to avoid seeing blue priests and that I had no business in the Noble's Quarter, the Noble's Gate had basically been irrelevant to me up until now.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

We passed through a door within the noble area and found the High Priest clad in silver armor, along with Arno holding the staff that was the Goddess of Water Flutrane's divine instrument.

The High Priest's entire body was covered in plate armor, and on top of that he held a full helmet beneath his left arm. The helmet wasn't very decorated, but it was styled like a Corinthian helmet from Ancient Greece, where there was a T shape in the front which covered the nose but left the eyes and mouth visible. To top things off, his gleaming silver armor had a blue cape covered in vibrant designs.

In front of them was a tall wall that seemed to separate the temple from the outside, with a large two-doored gate that seemed impossible for human strength alone to open. Each were made of the same white marble as the temple, and under the sunlight they were so bright it was hard to look at them.

"Are those your ceremonial robes?" The High Priest looked me over from head to toe after Fran set me down, then spun his finger in a circle to instruct me to turn around. I held out my arms and spun so he could see more of it. "That is a somewhat unusual design, but it is better than I expected."

The High Priest's expression softened, then he called for Arno, who came this way and held out something towards me. "Myne," continued the High Priest, "you were born in summer, as I recall. I will lend this to you for now. You would do well to put it on your middle finger."

Arno had given me a ring with a large blue gem in the middle. The ring was clearly too big for me, but I took it and said my thanks before putting it on my left middle finger as instructed, expecting it to slide right off. But once it was on, the gem shone with a bright blue light and the ring shrunk to fit my finger perfectly.

"B-Bwuh?!"

"Cease gawking over every little thing."

"I-I mean, can you really blame me...?" How could I not be surprised? These weren't "little things" to me.

The High Priest lending me this ring meant that it would be important where we were going. And we were going to a land of fantasy, where nothing I knew would apply.

"Wait here," instructed the High Priest, who then walked to the gate with his armor clanking. Upon reaching it, he placed a hand upon

a door.

A massive magic circle immediately sprung into the air, just like the one that appeared over the hidden door in his room. The gate then began to open on its own, slowly but surely. And despite being used to automatic doors from my Urano days, the sight of that made my heart jump with surprise.

“Bwuh?!”

“Your commoner origins are painfully obvious. Could you at least try to remain silent?”

The High Priest was expecting too much from me, an actual commoner. But Arno and Fran seemed unfazed by the opening gate, likely due to having accompanied the High Priest to the Noble’s Quarter before as his attendants. If this was normal for nobles and something that both they and their attendants experienced on the regular, then the Knight’s Order would doubtlessly view me with suspicion if I were to keep letting out embarrassing cries of surprise. I pressed my lips together to try and contain them.

“Follow me.” The High Priest began walking through the open gate. Arno followed, and so did Fran after picking me up.

We passed through the gate and into the Noble’s Quarter, and my eyes widened in shock. It was like passing through the gate had taken us to another world. There was a large fountain in the middle of a paved stone plaza. The plaza gleamed white as it reflected the sun’s rays, and the street was made of the same stone.

In the lower city, tall buildings were crammed next to each other. But here, ivory stone paving and lush green parks stretched on as far as the eye could see. And unlike the filthy lower city, I couldn’t see a single trace of grime here. The Noble’s Quarter was startlingly clean and beautiful. Even the air was cleaner, perhaps due to something keeping it separated from the lower city.

There were twenty-some knights in the ivory plaza, each wearing silver armor similar to the High Priest’s but distinguished by yellow capes instead of blue. They were undoubtedly the Knight’s Order. And they must have noticed the gate opening, as they gathered together and formed four rows.

“Sister Myne, please act like a noble,” whispered Fran in a quiet voice with me still held in his arms. I nodded and attempted to make a graceful smile like Rosina’s.

Only the lone knight who stood in front of the others had a helm under his arm. He was a somewhat stocky older man with reddish-brown hair. Each movement he made was trained and precise, almost beautifully so, but he had the furiously intense air of a warrior.

He walked up to the High Priest and knelt before him, which signaled all the knights behind him to kneel as well, filling the air

with the sound of clanking armor. “Lord Ferdinand, I am pleased to see you well.”

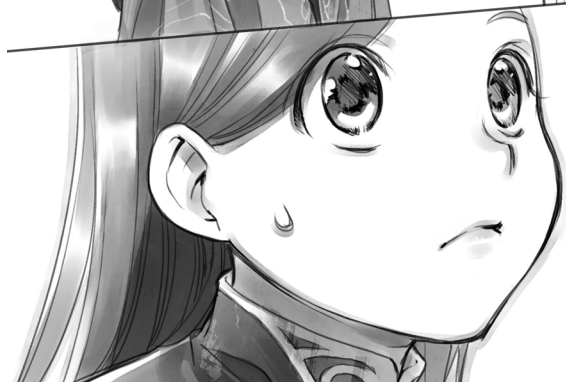
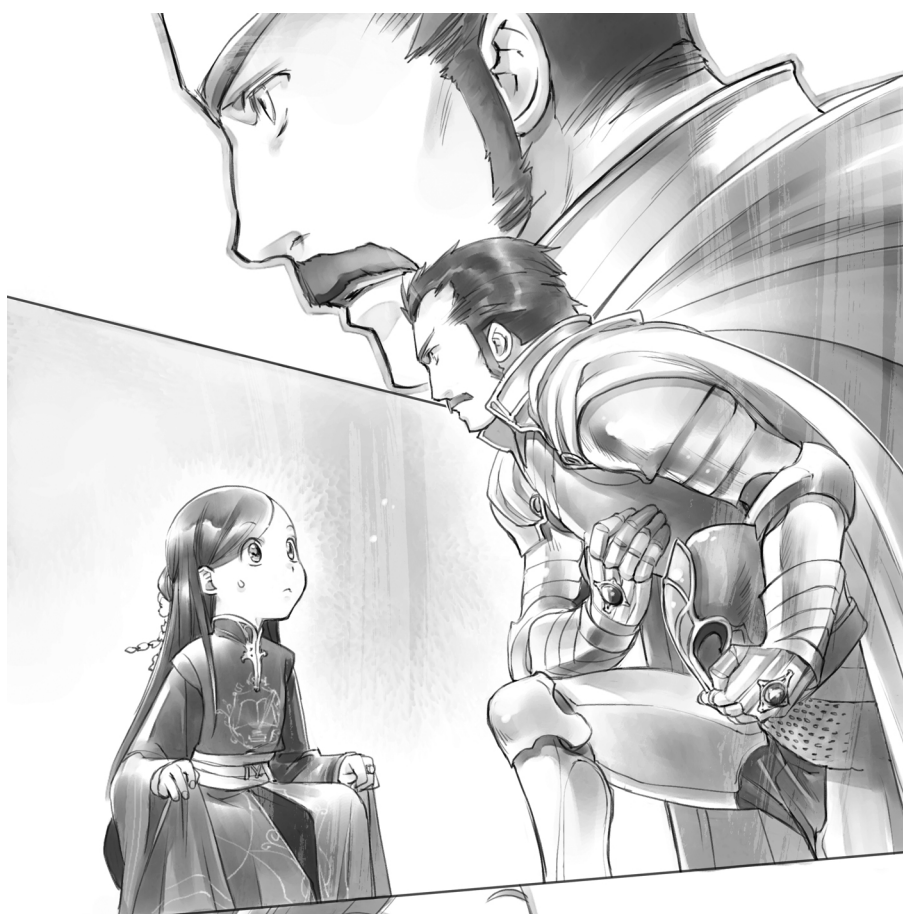
“Same to you, Karstedt.” The man talking to the High Priest seemed to be named Karstedt, and it wasn’t hard to guess that he was the captain or something of the Knight’s Order. “Not many knights with you today.”

“There are many who have not returned from the Harvest Festival.”

“I see,” murmured the High Priest in a resigned tone before lifting his hand. Fran set me down, and gently pushed me from behind so that I would stand in front. “Karstedt, this is Myne, the apprentice shrine maiden who will be performing the ritual. Keep an eye on her, if you would.”

“Greetings, Lord Karstedt. I am Myne. It is a pleasure to meet you.” I knelt before Karstedt and greeted him, calling him Lord as was appropriate to do for a noble of higher status. Our eyes met as I knelt, and his light-blue eyes narrowed as if he were evaluating me.

“A pleasure to meet you as well.”



“Let us be off, then.”

At the High Priest’s words, all the knights stood up and touched the gems embedded on their right gauntlets. The gems shone brightly, and in moments the plaza was filled with sculpted animals. Judging by the fact that the gems were gone from each gauntlet, these multicolored animals had probably been created from them just like the bird had been created from the stone.

“Karstedt, allow our attendants to ride with one of your knights. Myne, come with me.” The High Priest, now wearing his helmet, gave instructions while picking me up and setting me onto what appeared to be a white lion with wings. I straddled its back, trying to maintain my balance.

The High Priest jumped onto the animal’s back behind me with surprising spryness for someone wearing a full set of plate armor, then gripped the reins. The lion sculpture immediately proved not to be a sculpture and started moving like a normal animal.

“Bwuh?!” I jerked from the unexpected movement, hitting the back of my head against the High Priest’s chestplate. “O-Owwww...”

“You would do well to keep your mouth shut. Unless you want to bite your tongue off, that is.”

I clenched my teeth hard and leaned a bit forward, then gripped the shaking reins in front of me. The winged lion ran a few steps forward, then jumped high into the air with its wings spread wide. For a second I felt something hit me, like I had jumped through a giant spider web, but the feeling only lasted a moment. We raced through the sky, flying right over the lower city.

“Wow, we’re so high...!”

“Were you not afraid?”

“I was just surprised at something unnatural I didn’t expect happening. This is actually less scary than carriages, since it isn’t shaky.”

The magical lion soaring through the sky felt kind of like a slow roller coaster. It was much more comfortable since it didn’t shake hard like a carriage. The lack of a safety belt was, uh, *thrilling* to say the least, but I wasn’t that scared since I was nestled between the High Priest’s arms as they gripped the reins.

Other flying animal sculptures rose into the air alongside us. Horses seemed to be the most common one, and so a rainbow of different colored flying horses soared through the sky. There were some wolves and tigers in the midst too. Personally, I thought the flying rabbit was the cutest one.

“High Priest, what are these animals?”

“They are highbeasts made from magic stones. They will move

freely as long as their supply of mana does not run dry. It is up to the caster to decide what animal to turn their stone into.”

We passed the lower city, flying over the gate and following the city road from above. I could just barely see the distant walls of another city in the direction the road was going. Our city was surrounded by lush forests and sprawling farms that had just finished participating in the Harvest Festival.

“High Priest, where are we going?”

“Over there.” The High Priest pointed towards the far end of the forest where we usually went gathering. There was a large crater opening a hole in the forest. I did a double take and realized that it was a wide expanse of exposed dirt with no grass or trees, yet somehow... there was a massive plant monster rampaging in the middle, swinging giant branches around. And the more it rampaged, the larger the crater grew.

“Wh-What is that thing?”

“A feyplant known as a trombe.”

“Bwuh?! Th-That’s a trombe?!” The rampaging trombe in the middle of the crater was so unlike the stretchy tree things I knew that I hadn’t recognized it at all.

But speaking of which, I remembered how Lutz and the other kids had all freaked out after seeing a trombe, and how half of the guards at the gate had to work together to take one down once it got too big. I had heard that the Knight’s Order would get involved when the trombe got too big for soldiers to deal with, but I hadn’t expected it would end up this monstrous.

...*They’re dangerous.* Only now did I understand why Lutz got so mad when I suggested way back when that we cultivate trombes ourselves.

“You will be needed after the knights finish it off. Until then, hide in the forest and do not put yourself in danger.” It seemed that it was the duty of priests to restore mana to ground drained of its own mana by trombes. Due to their diminished numbers, the High Priest was helping the Knight’s Order kill the trombe, and then would help me restore mana to the ground afterwards.

...*Is it just me, or is the High Priest kind of amazing?*

The High Priest pulled the reins and descended to an opening a short distance away from the trombe’s crater. The rest of the Knight’s Order followed him down.

“Myne, wait here with Fran and Arno. Karstedt, assign two of your men to guard her for me.” He slid off the back of his lion and turned around to speak to Karstedt, who nodded and selected two guards.

“Damuel, Shikza. Guard her.”

“Yes sir!”

The knights named Damuel and Shikza climbed off their flying horses to serve as my guards. The horses flashed with light that beamed into the holes in their gauntlets, turning back into gemstones in the process.

“Thank you for the assistance.” Fran and Arno thanked the knights who had flown them here before nimbly jumping off the animals. I tried learning from their example and jumping off, but the High Priest glared at me before I could, stopping me with one angry look.

...Oh, right. I need to be graceful. I remembered that I was supposed to be acting like a noble and turned sideways on top of the lion, which had stopped moving entirely like a statue.

“You will be the end of me,” muttered the High Priest as he picked me up and set me down onto the ground. He then looked up and spoke in a louder voice. “Guard the apprentice shrine maiden closely. Allow no harm whatsoever to come to her, not even a single scratch.”

The two knights ordered to guard me nodded with a firm “Yes sir!”

The trombe’s crater continued to grow in size bit by bit as everyone got off their highbeasts. Out of nowhere I heard the mass fluttering of a flock of birds, and then the sound of something heavy hitting the ground so hard the earth shook.

“Kyaaah?!”

Through the cracks in the trees I could see that a massive one had fallen. Roots that seemed almost alive sprouted from the trombe’s crater and wrapped around the fallen tree. Its leaves dried and crumbled before our eyes as the large trunk dried out as its life was sucked out. And once it was completely sapped, the roots returned to the ground, having nothing more to do.

I felt a cold sweat of terror run down my back. I had never imagined that trombes were so monstrous. With fear in my heart for the Knight’s Order about to fight the rampaging trombe just ahead of us, I knelt to the ground.

“High Priest, men of the Knight’s Order... I pray for your success in battle. May you all have the divine protection of Angriff, God of War and subordinate to Leidenschaft.” The moment I said that, the ring the High Priest had given me glowed blue and light fell upon the members of the Knight’s Order. I realized that the stone in the ring was sucking up my mana and hurriedly held it back. The ring stopped glowing once I had my mana completely cut off from it.

“We have the blessing of an apprentice shrine maiden, men. Let’s go!” roared Karstedt, which made me realize what I had done. I looked up at the High Priest and saw that he was looking down at me with a conflicted expression.

“Myne. Under no circumstances, no circumstances whatsoever, should you make any move until it is time for you to perform the ritual,” he said, emphasizing the “under no circumstances” part extra hard before straddling his lion and soaring upwards. The other knights followed suit, gripping their reins and flying into the air.

Trombe Extermination

“That sure was a pointless blessing. What are you, stupid?” One of the knights mocked me with a smug snort once the rest of the Order was well into the air.

“Shikza, why would you say that?!”

I couldn’t tell them apart since they both had their helmets on, revealing only part of their eyes and mouths, but it seemed that the smug one was Shikza and the one trying to get him to stop was Damuel. Judging by their voices, they were both fairly young. They had probably just come of age, if they had at all.

“Am I wrong, though? We’re in a big mana shortage and there she goes wasting some, blessing knights fighting a trombe of all things. Either she’s stupid or nobody is.” Shikza knocked aside Damuel’s hands and pointed at me.

“It’s true that the Order would never lose to a trombe, blessing or not, but Angriff’s blessing will still be a big help! Especially since we’re so low on numbers now.”

I listened to their argument with a cold sweat running down my back. I only said what I did because I wanted to pray for their safety when fighting against that giant trombe. I didn’t realize that trying to talk like a noble with references to the gods would make something an actual blessing. When my ring started glowing out of nowhere, I was more surprised than anybody. The prayer never would have happened if the High Priest hadn’t lent me this ring. It was a complete and total accident.

...I’m sure the High Priest was surprised too.

Not to mention, he was calling it a waste of mana, but I stopped the flow of mana the second I noticed it. Only a tiny fraction of my mana ended up sucked into the ring. I doubted it would cause any problems with the upcoming ritual.

“I apologize if I have offended you in any way. I will take greater care in the future.” I kept my protests on the inside and just apologized immediately to prevent things from escalating into something I really wouldn’t want to deal with. Shikza gave me another dismissive snort, but if that ended the conversation I was totally fine with it.

“You don’t need to worry about what Shikza says,” said Damuel in a consoling tone. “A blessing that boosts mana will be really

appreciated right now, since we're so low on numbers. And... here, take a look. It's about to start." He pointed to the sky.

I followed the direction of his finger, and through the branches I could see glimpses of the knights flying in circles in the sky. I stretched my back a bit and squinted, hoping to see how in the world they planned to beat that monstrous trombe.

"*****!" I heard a faint shout in the distance. I wasn't sure who had shouted or what, but at its signal all the knights took glowing black weapons into their hands, each radiating what looked like pure darkness.

"What are those? Do you know, Fran?"

"No, this is the first time I am seeing a battle so close."

It seemed that attendants rarely accompanied priests answering the summons of the Knight's Order, since it necessitated one priest fighting alongside the knights to provide magical support while the other stood at the ready with the divine instrument. But since the High Priest was fighting with the Order and I couldn't stand waiting with a divine instrument twice my size, Fran and Arno had come along to keep an eye on me.

"Shrine maiden, those are weapons with the divine protection of the God of Darkness bestowed upon them. If you infuse them with your mana and attack, you can take twice the amount of mana from anything you hit and make it yours. They're vital for exterminating trombes."

Having not expected a noble to go out of his way to explain things for me, I looked up at the armor-clad Damuel in surprise. I could only see slivers of his face through the helm, but it didn't seem like he was looking down on me for being a commoner.

"Not many people get the chance to see knights fighting like this. I wouldn't waste this opportunity if I were you."

"I thank you ever so much."

"We start by wearing it down with arrows. Look, the one with the blue cape is Lord Ferdinand." Damuel pointed at a knight riding a lion and pulling back the string of a sizable bow. He resembled a nomad shooting a bow on horseback. The cape flowing in the wind behind him was the only blue cape in the midst of all the yellow capes.

...That's the High Priest! Wow! Go get him! I couldn't actually shout my support, so I cheered him on silently. He was too far away for me to see the actual string itself, but I could tell when he shot from the movements of his arm and the arrow flying from the bow.

The arrow shot through the sky and burst into multiple smaller black arrows which fell upon the giant trombe like rain. Each arrow burst into an explosion of light upon hitting the plant. But the giant trombe just kept swinging its branches, as if not even a storm of

arrows meant anything to it.

"It takes a lot of mana to split an arrow into that many smaller ones. And yet Lord Ferdinand can shoot out tons of arrows like that. Pretty impressive, huh?" Damuel seemed to really admire the High Priest, judging by the fact he was proudly telling me how amazing he was.

"I wish he would come back to the Order soon..." murmured Damuel in the midst of his praise, which made me blink in surprise. Damuel noticed me looking at him, and after an awkward silence, coughed.

"...That's confidential."

"Understood. I won't tell anyone."

I had heard that the High Priest wasn't raised in the temple, and it seemed that he had been in the Knight's Order of all places. That explained how he knew Karstedt and why they had matching sets of armor. I never would have imagined from his slender build and grumpy, bookish appearance that he served as a knight and not just as a desk jockey, but now that I was seeing him fight, he seemed to be right in his element.

...To think that he's a master of both the pen and the sword. Is it just me, or is the High Priest kinda amazing? I wish he would lend me some of that talent, I thought while looking up at him fight. He launched arrow after arrow at the trombe while his blue cape fluttered behind him.

"Looks like it's starting to take its toll. Can you see the trombe turning black?" As Damuel said, each spot the High Priest's rain of arrows hit was now turning black. The tiny black dots looked like stains, and with each arrow another one joined the midst.

"I can see them. Oh... the branches." As if those black spots were rotting the trombe from the inside out, one of the branches it had been swinging around snapped at the base and fell to the ground with a thud. The fallen branch shone brightly and vanished.

The giant trombe stretched out one of its still-healthy branches as far as it could to try and knock down the flying knights, but they were all too nimble to be hit. In contrast, the knights wielded their black halberds—each of which looked like a fusion of an axe, a spear, and a jagged pike—and chopped, sliced, and stabbed at the branches, which turned increasingly black until they fell to the ground.

The branches fell one after another, and before I knew it the trombe's crater had stopped growing. With fewer swinging branches dominating the airspace, the knights were able to fly close to the trombe's trunk and attack it directly. It was an enormous trunk, but it too became covered in black spots. I could easily tell that the trombe was losing strength with each blow it took.

"Should be over soon," murmured Damuel, looking a bit more

relaxed than earlier. At the start I had no idea how the knights would survive fighting such a dangerous giant, but they were finishing it off much faster than I expected. I sighed in relief too.

“I didn’t know how anyone could fight with a monster like that, so I’m glad to see nobody ended up getting hurt.”

“This happens every year. We might be short on members, but we’re not going to lose to a trombe. Especially with Lord Ferdinand helping. As far as I can tell, cutting down those branches was a lot easier thanks to him.”

It seemed that killing the trombe would have taken a lot longer without the High Priest raining barrages of arrows down onto it. Without many ways to attack the trombe from a distance, they would have to get in close to weaken it, which ended up with multiple knights getting sent flying by branches every year.

I couldn’t see his face well due to the helmet, but Damuel had a kind and gentle voice. I looked up at him with a smile, then heard a hateful tongue click from behind.

“Damuel, why are you acting all buddy-buddy with a commoner? Oh, has nobody told you who she is? Allow me to inform you that the girl you’re talking to is a commoner. She’s a fool who doesn’t know her place, wearing a noble’s blue robes despite her dirty blood. I honestly have no idea what Lord Ferdinand was thinking when he gave a lowly commoner blue robes. Surely a shortage of mana is better than this.”

“Shikza, what are you saying...? Don’t lie like that.” Damuel’s shaken tone made it clear that he hadn’t known that I was a commoner. He must have so kindly explained the situation because he thought I was an apprentice shrine maiden of noble birth.

I took a step back, distancing myself from both Shikza and Damuel. I had no idea what a noble would do after learning that I was a commoner. Things could get bad if he reacted like the High Bishop had.

“It’s true. The High Bishop visited my family’s home during the Starbind Ceremony and bemoaned his suffering. ‘A lone commoner girl is destroying order in the temple,’ he said.”

...So it was you all along, High Bishop! I had driven him into the corner of my memory since I never saw him in the temple and he hadn’t done anything to me, but it seemed that he had been moaning about me endlessly to nobles around the city.

Thiiii is bad. And it might get a lot worse? Since I was a commoner, all of my protests would fall on deaf ears. They could distort the truth to suit their needs and do whatever they wanted under false pretenses. Hateful gossiping like this would be a dangerous enemy to me while I was traveling with the Knight’s Order, which consisted entirely of

nobles.

“Say something, commoner scum.” So Shikza said, but I didn’t know what he wanted from me. I had no idea what a noble would do to me if I said the wrong thing. But it seemed that keeping my silence angered Shikza more, and his lips curved into a sadistic grin. “What, nothing cocky to say without Lord Ferdinand here to protect you?”

“Stop it, Shikza! We’re supposed to be protecting her! Her status doesn’t change the job we’ve been given!” yelled Damuel, standing in front of me protectively. But that just poured oil on the flames of Shikza’s anger.

“Shut it, Damuel! Know your place! Don’t try to order me around ever again!”

Damuel gritted his teeth and stepped to the side. Now that I could see in front of me, I saw Shikza walking this way. The sight of an armorclad man clanking his way towards me with eyes full of hate was nothing short of terrifying.

...I’m scared. My legs shook and my teeth chattered. I wanted to run away, but I couldn’t move my legs. Seeing how scared I was, Shikza cackled and rose a clenched, armored fist.

“Sister Myne!”

“Out of the way!” Fran leapt between us to protect me, but Shikza pushed him so hard he was sent flying.

“Fran!” I instinctively raced towards Fran, but Shikza grabbed the back of my hair and stopped me. I could feel several strands ripping out of the back of my head as he pulled me back.

“Ow!”

“Sister Myne!”

“Fran!” yelled Arno as Fran speedily got up and tried to rescue me. “You must not move! Your master is being punished for you acting out of place. You must not make things even worse.”

Hearing that, Fran bit his lip and froze, which made Shikza grin even harder in amusement as he violently pulled on my hair.

“Listen up, commoner. At times like these you’re supposed to apologize for your attendant’s rudeness.”

Fran was biting his lip to hold his anger back, and I had to learn from his example. I had been told countless times not to argue with nobles. My safest bet would be to just apologize.

“...I apologize for my attendant offending you.” But it seemed that my apology just ticked Shikza off more. He planted a boot on my chest and kicked, sending me flying to the ground. My butt hurt and I could barely breathe, but at least he wasn’t holding my hair anymore.

“What’s with those smug eyes?! Want me to gouge them out?!” barked Shikza furiously before pressing a hand against the gemstone in his left hand and drawing a faintly glowing baton from it. He spun

it around and murmured “*messer*,” which turned the thin baton into a small knife. Its pointed tip gleamed in the light.

I swallowed hard at the sight of a knife being thrust in my direction. Cold sweat ran down my back and I could feel my heart beating unnaturally fast. My legs were so shaky I couldn’t even stand up. All I could do was stare at the gleaming blade.

“Shikza, don’t! We’re supposed to be protecting her! She’s the apprentice shrine maiden we need for the ritual!” Damuel panicked at the sight of the blade and reached out, but Shikza knocked both his warning and hand aside before lifting up the knife.

“Shut it! She doesn’t need eyes to perform the ritual!” he said with the knife in the air. I curled up like a turtle with my hands on my head to protect myself from it. “That’s right! Commoners like you just need to ball up and show us nobles respect!”

I shut my eyes tight, and soon heard the sound of flapping wings behind Shikza as he shouted. I looked up into the sky and saw a blue cape fluttering high in the sky behind the upheld knife.

“High Priest!” Knowing that he could protect me from Shikza, I immediately stood up to cry for help. But I stood up just as Shikza was hurriedly lowering his hand after hearing the words “High Priest,” and it sliced the back of my left hand since I was covering my head with it.

“Ow!”

“Why would you stand up, idiot?!”

I lowered my hand and saw at a glance that the blade had cut fairly deep, aided by gravity. It would take a long time for the bleeding to stop. But I knew complaining to a noble would get me nowhere, so I just hurriedly pulled back my sleeve so my ceremonial robes wouldn’t get dirty. I held my left arm straight forward and held its sleeve up with my right hand.

“Sister Myne, allow me.” Fran immediately knelt beside me and stuck his hand into his waist pouch. It seemed that he had prepared something in case I got hurt. My attendants really were top of their class.

“Thank you, Fran.”

Blood gushed from my gaping wound down to my wrist before dripping to the ground. And the second my blood soaked into the ground, it began to rumble loudly. My blood continued to drip as I looked down, confused. With each drop the ground rumbled harder, and in the blink of an eye trombe sprouts burst out of the ground right beneath me.

“Bwuh?!” The trombe grew faster than any I had seen before, and its branches were wrapped around my feet before I knew what was happening.

“Ah! No!” I desperately tried to kick them off my feet, but branch

after branch wrapped itself around me. By the time I pulled one branch off several more would replace it, wrapping themselves so tightly around my ankles I couldn't take a single step. And the whole time my dripping blood was invigorating the trombe further, making it sprout in all directions as it raced up my body.

"Th-This isn't my fault! You shouldn't have stood up like that!" Shikza sliced away at the trombe in a panic with his knife as he stepped back to get away from me.

"Sister Myne!" Fran, lacking a blade, tried to pull the trombe off me with his bare hands, but the branches had grown large enough that it was long impossible to break them with hands alone.

The trombe reached my knees, then stretched up my thighs. Its green sprouts stretched out and bloomed into white stems, while its stretching trunk browned like the color of a tree. The stems wrapping around me grew thicker bit by bit as they wrapped around me, tightening enough to hurt while new sprouts reached out to me.

"Apprentice!" Damuel took out a glowing baton from his left gauntlet and turned it into a knife. But even as he did so, the trombe's branches wrapped around me ten, twenty times. "Hold on, I have to grant myself the God of Darkness's divine protection. I'll save you as soon as I can."

Damuel began chanting a prayer. It strongly resembled the same prayer I would be giving during the ritual, one that praised the gods and prayed for their divine protection. Or in other words, it was long enough that I had to work hard to memorize it all, and just thinking about how much the trombe would grow while he prayed sent a shudder down my spine.

...I'm scared! My teeth chattered. Thoughts of the tree falling into the giant trombe's crater and having the life sucked out of it flashed through my mind.

So scared! I'm so scared! Tears brimmed in my eyes in terror of being consumed by the trombe. I waved my arms around to knock off the branches, but that just sent blood flying everywhere that made more sprouts pop out of the ground.

The stalks wrapped around my thighs stretched out to my hips and stomach. I couldn't even move, and I was so terrified that I screamed as loud as I could for help.

"Lutz! Lutz! Help me, Lutz!"

Rescue and Reprimand

It all happened right after I cried for help as loud as I could with my hands in the air to try to stop the bleeding. A beam of blue light shot high into the sky, and then immediately black somethings rained down around me as I heard the sound of flapping wings.

The ground shook as the things slammed into the ground. I strained to look and saw multiple black arrows piercing the ground by my feet. The trombe wrapped around me calmed, as if its strength had been drained.

“High Priest!” The familiar arrows encouraged me to look up. I could see a lion with its wings spread wide racing towards me. With his arrows, I should be fine.

But my relief only lasted a few seconds. The blood dripping from my hand revitalized the trombe in seconds. It resumed moving, stretching from my stomach to my chest. New sprout after new sprout appeared, wrapping around me further and tightening the grip on my feet.

“Hurry, High Priest...!” The white lion swooped down, and the High Priest jumped from it so quickly it was hard to believe he was wearing a full suit of plate armor. In his hand was a black arrow, blessed by the God of Darkness. He used it to stab and slice at the trombe while rushing this way.

“Myne, what in the world is going on?!” he shouted.

“Apprentice, I’m done!” Damuel, having finally gotten the God of Darkness’s divine protection, began swinging his knife and fighting hard to free me. But Damuel’s knife didn’t hold a candle to the High Priest’s black arrows. No matter how much he sliced, the trombe didn’t slow down at all. “The protection isn’t working?”

“The protection is working! It’s just that the trombe is recovering immediately, somehow!”

The trombe would stop moving after being pierced by arrows, but within moments it would regain its power and begin moving again. It was slower than before, but it wasn’t rotting or falling apart at all. The High Priest clicked his tongue as he continued slicing with an arrow.

“High Priest, my blood... It’s my blood, getting on the trombe...!”

“Your blood?! No! Of all things!” The High Priest’s voice grew harsher after I told him why the trombe was rejuvenating. Despite his helm blocking most of his face, I could see that his eyebrows had shot

up with fury.

“For what purpose do you think I separated you from the battle and went out of my way to assign guards to you?! What purpose did those guards serve?! Incompetent fools, both of them!” He spat curses at the two knights who had been left behind to guard me.

Damuel was fighting hard with his black knife, and Shikza was in the middle of trying to get the God of Darkness’s blessing. Given that Shikza had ignored his superior’s order and hurt the one he was meant to protect with a knife, resulting in the current situation, they definitely were incompetent at their jobs.

And incidentally, judging by the curses the High Priest continued to spit out while fending off the trombe with his arrow, I had excessively high amounts of mana. He murmured that even if half of the entire Knight’s Order attacked the trombe at once, Damuel included, nothing would come from it.

“No amount of fighting will matter while your wound remains open. Myne, where were you cut?!”

“Right here.” I reached my left hand as far out as I could.

The High Priest clicked his tongue at the sight of the gaping wound and murmured “*entwaffnung*.” His black bow turned into a glowing baton. He then murmured “*rott*” and swung the baton, leading to a red pillar of light shooting into the sky. That must have been some kind of signal, as the other knights began flying this way.

“This will hurt, but contain your tears. They are infused with mana just as your blood is,” warned the High Priest before gently tracing his glowing baton against my wound. The moment the light radiating from his baton touched my skin, my entire body jerked.

“Hyah!” The pain and unsettling feeling of something foreign forcing its way inside of my body hit me so hard that goosebumps formed across my body. Instinctual tears welled in my eyes, so I looked up and took deep breaths so they wouldn’t fall.

My wound heated up and I could feel the mana inside of me all racing towards my wound to block the entry of the foreign substance. My mana hit the mana the High Priest was pouring into me, and my wound shone with a faint yellow light. When it faded, my wound had completely closed up.

“The cut...”

“That was a temporary measure that did nothing more than seal the wound. The mana has sealed it, but not cured it. Using mana right on top of a trombe is tantamount to suicide, but we had no choice,” spoke the High Priest, sounding exhausted. My wound had sealed, but the trombe was even more energized than before.

“High Priest...”

“I had to sever my divine protection to heal your wound. I no

longer have a weapon capable of combating a trombe. Help should be arriving soon, but..." The High Priest trailed off and glared at the sky, then shouted "Hurry!" at the descending knights. He was normally so calm and rarely showed any emotions outside of the hidden room, so hearing him shout angrily made me jerk within my branch prison.

"Lord Ferdinand, why did you signal for a— What in the world?!" The knights descended one by one, each widening their eyes with shock upon seeing me imprisoned within a second trombe.

"Karstedt, the guards you selected are incompetent and brought about this mess. Save Myne immediately. I had to sever my protection and thus will be of no use. The branches are approaching her neck. Hurry."

"Sir!"

The High Priest, lacking any weapons to fight the trombe with, stepped back and let another armored knight charge forward, swinging his black halberd down. It slammed into the ground with a loud crash, sending a dirt cloud and trombe chunks flying. I gagged and coughed on the cloud.

"Karstedt, do not put a scratch on Myne! That will only feed it further!"

After instructing Karstedt to swing his blade such that he cut away the branches without harming me, the High Priest walked towards Shikza and the attendants. I could see the wrath radiating off him clear as day and honestly, it was terrifying.

If worse comes to worst, given our difference in status, it was possible that he would take all of Shikza's complaints to heart and unleash all his fury onto me. It was even a possibility that I would be charged with some crime or another since it was my blood that had given the trombe life. I just couldn't deny the possibility.

As I began to wallow in despair over what the future held for me, a large number of knights crowded around me. They thrust their halberds into the mess of branches and chopped the trombe's roots apart without pausing for a moment. Meanwhile, Damuel used his black knife to cut the stalks that had started to wrap around my neck bit by bit.

"...The divine protection's doing its work," said Damuel with relief. Since the cut on the back of my hand had been sealed, there was no dripping blood to revitalize the trombe. It stopped growing.

Just as they had with the giant trombe, weapons with the God of Darkness's blessing turned the branches black wherever they touched. I let out a sigh of relief once I was free from the fear of being choked by the branches.

"Ngh, this is hard!"

"You're the only one here with a knife. Be careful, Damuel." It

seemed that they couldn't change the shape of their weapons after they received the blessing. The knights had to use their large weapons meant for cutting down the giant trombe carefully, slicing away the branches bit by bit.

"Damuel, and you... Myne, I believe? How did this happen? I have never seen Lord Ferdinand that angry before." Karstedt lowered his voice and asked that as soon as he could while chopping away the branches at my feet with his halberd.

"Well..." Damuel looked in Shikza's direction, his armor clanking. But he trailed off, lacking the will to speak up. His weak attitude was both frustrating, and a grim reminder of how harsh this status-based society really was.

Now that the branches around my throat had been cut down to my chest, it would be pretty simple for me to just state the truth. But I didn't know if Karstedt would believe me, and I could imagine that it would all come down to status. I had no idea if anyone would listen to or trust a commoner apprentice shrine maiden like me. Karstedt was a noble too, after all. *What should I do...?*"

"I want as much information as possible. Say what you know." Karstedt urged Damuel and me on with clear, teeth-gritting frustration in his voice. Which reminded me that the High Priest had yelled in anger at Karstedt as well, saying that he had selected incompetent fools as guards. Given that Karstedt wanted to know why the High Priest was so mad, he might listen to what I had to say just to protect himself.

"Lord Karstedt, will you guarantee my safety if I speak what I know?" I asked Karstedt, in part trying to confirm if Shikza's behavior was normal for a noble. Now was a rare safe opportunity for me to speak, since they probably wouldn't kill me before I had performed the ritual. "If I tell the truth, will you be so angered that you pull me by the hair and attempt to gouge out my eyes with a knife if you don't like what I say?"

"What in the world...? Damuel, did you do that to an apprentice shrine maiden?!" Karstedt removed his helmet with a loud clank. His face was filled with blatant fury and his narrowed eyes cut right through Damuel, who began sputtering in surprise to try and defend himself.

"It wasn't me! Shikza took out the knife to threaten the apprentice. I tried to help her, but he told me to know my pla—"

"You fool! Of course Lord Ferdinand is furious!" Karstedt ripped part of the black, brittle trombe off me using sheer force. The branches creaked as they burst apart in his hands.

It seemed that Karstedt was just as mad at the guards as the High Priest was. I concluded that I could probably tell the truth without

worrying about him going slicing away at me in rage.

Karstedt directed his rage-filled, light-blue eyes towards me. "Myne, tell me everything. Swear an oath to the gods and speak with honesty."

"Understood. Lord Karstedt, I swear to the gods I will not lie to you."

"Hold on," said Damuel as he raised a hand, but Karstedt swatted it away. He intended to hear me out, and I was willing to tell.

And so I did, telling him everything the two guards had done in detail, while emphasizing that the attendants could serve as reliable witnesses to back me up.

The trombe was so tightly woven around me in so many layers that it would take some time to untangle me safely. So much time that it wasn't even done by the time I finished telling Karstedt everything.

"Are you alright?"

"...No. Please call my attendant."

To be frank, I was a complete mess. My new ceremonial robes were ripped everywhere, and there were holes wherever blood had fallen, as if the trombe had eaten the bloody cloth itself. My body hurt everywhere, and due to fighting back so hard against the trombe I felt so exhausted I could barely move.

"Where is the apprentice shrine maiden's attendant?!" Karstedt hefted up my exhausted body. It seemed my droopy self would just get in the way of them chopping the roots up. His metal armor dug into me all over and it hurt, but I didn't have the strength to complain.

"Sister Myne!" I looked over to Fran as he came running this way. Karstedt handed me to him and I let myself collapse into Fran's arms.

"High Priest, she has a fever!"

"I would expect as much. Let her rest nearby and give her medicine. She has lost blood and was tangled in a trombe of that size. No doubt she has lost much of her mana." The High Priest, having finished interrogating Shikza, took only one glance at me before looking away. Now that his helmet was off and I could see his expression clearly, he seemed even more furious than before.

"Understood." Fran sat me down in a warm spot where the sun hit, then took a bottle with a light-green liquid inside out of his bag.

"Please drink this, Sister Myne. It is the High Priest's potion." Drinking something I didn't recognize was intimidating, but he would probably force me to drink it whether I wanted to or not. Having no other choice, I went to take the bottle. But I had kept my arms raised to stop the flow of blood so long that they were like lead. I couldn't lift either of them.

"I'm sorry, Fran. It seems I can't lift my arms."

Fran supported my limp back and brought the opened bottle to

my mouth for me. The smell of the potion shot into my nose, so strong and similar to Chinese herbal recipes that it made me gag.

“Fran, is this really okay to drink?”

“The High Priest drank some himself earlier. It is a rejuvenation potion for exhaustion and mana that he personally prepared.”

I could hardly refuse a potion that beneficial. And if the High Priest himself had drank some, I could trust that it wasn't poison. I let it pour down my throat while grimacing at the strong smell.

“Ngmmh?!” I hurriedly shut my mouth before I could throw it all up. Tears surged out of my eyes and my entire body shook. My tongue went numb and my throat burned like it was on fire. The horrible flavor was so intense and overwhelming it honestly made me think that I wouldn't be able to taste any food for days after this. It was hard to imagine that this potion was fit for human consumption.

Fran paled at the sight of me twitching with my mouth shut and ran over to the High Priest. “High Priest, Sister Myne appears to be in great pain....”

“I sacrificed the taste so that it would take effect immediately,” replied the High Priest without even glancing in my direction. He wasn't wrong, either, as I could already feel the weight lifting from my body and the fever cooling down.

“...Wow. I think my fever's gone.” The potion was so effective I couldn't believe it. But it tasted so horrible that not even truisms about bad-tasting medicine being good for you could make me feel better about it. I could honestly see myself begging for him to improve the flavor. He probably wouldn't listen since he had sacrificed it intentionally to improve its effects, but at the very least he could try to make it taste like kale juice.

The knights finished eradicating the trombe while I was resting. Unlike the giant one, this trombe hadn't made a crater. One of the knights said it was because it had bloomed from my mana. Naturally occurring trombes buried deep into the ground and sucked up mana from the ground for months, or at worst for years before sprouting. The roots ended up so deep that exterminating them was a Herculean task.

“Everyone, form up!” The knights lined up in formation at Karstedt's order. The only ones who didn't were me and the guards who had been assigned to me. They had both taken off their helmets and were kneeling before the High Priest next to each other, eyes locked to the ground.

“Myne, come here.” I was there with everyone else since I could move again. After being called by the High Priest, I walked up and stood a half-step behind him. I was so short that I made eye contact with the two guards once they lifted their heads a bit. As I had

expected from their voices, they both looked younger than twenty, likely having just reached adulthood.

Shikza had yellow-green hair that screamed personality, and deep green eyes filled with hate. He had a nice face, but he wore his arrogance on his sleeve and spoiled it all. His eyes made it clear that he considered me responsible for everything.

Damuel had plain brown hair. His gray eyes were filled with worry, and he wore a deeply apologetic expression. I hadn't noticed when he had the helmet on, but well, he felt like the kind of guy that was just asking to be bullied.

"Now then. Shikza, Damuel. If you have anything to say in your defense, now is the time," said the High Priest. Shikza lifted his head.

"There is no need for me to defend myself. That girl is a commoner, and that alone is enough." He spoke with such utter confidence that it was impossible not to realize he fully expected that defense to be enough.

I pressed a hand onto my chest, overcome by the sheer horror that lurked beneath his words. He didn't need to defend himself because I was a commoner. In this world, nobles trampling on commoners with impunity wasn't just commonplace, it was accepted as the proper way of things.

"You say that despite the fact that I told you not to let any harm come to her?"

"The commoner hurt herself by standing up without warning. I am not to blame for that." Shikza shook his head even after the High Priest spoke with dripping rage.

"I see," murmured the High Priest. He then looked at Damuel, who twitched in fear at the High Priest's gaze before looking down and beginning to speak.

"I was told to know my place and did not have the courage to defy him further. Forgive me."

The High Priest looked at Damuel, whose eyes were locked on the ground, and sighed. "Yes. As your defenses suggest, it seems we must each remember our place." At the High Priest's words, Shikza looked up with glee written on his face. He shot me a triumphant grin and I couldn't help but grit my teeth with frustration while fiddling with a hole in my robes.

The High Priest took a step forward. "Who here has the highest status, Shikza?"

"You, Lord Ferdinand," Shikza replied immediately, which told how obvious his answer was. But he didn't get the intent of the question, and thus tilted his head a bit in confusion.

"That's correct. And I gave a clear order. Protect the apprentice shrine maiden. Let no harm come to her. If you knew your place, you

would know what to prioritize and what job to fulfill. *You* are the one who needs to remember their place!”

Shikza looked up at the High Priest in shock. His expression was baffled, and his eyes were open wide in disbelief. “But she is a commoner. A foolish child that is disturbing the temple’s order...”

“It seems you do not understand the situation, so I will explain. Myne is an apprentice shrine maiden who has been given blue robes. We of the temple sought her entry due to her great amount of mana, and gave her blue robes with the Archduke’s express permission. Know well that by insulting her, you are insulting the temple and the Archduke himself!” declared the High Priest, and I heard everyone gasp—Shikza, Damuel, and even some of the knights lined up behind me.

“As you know, our country does not have enough nobles. That means we do not have enough mana wielders to operate the systems of government. You should know that well, as one who returned to noble society from the temple.”

It seemed that the High Priest and Shikza knew each other because Shikza had been raised in the temple as an apprentice blue priest. That would explain why he felt so much resistance towards a commoner like me wearing blue robes. All the blue-robed priests in the temple had blown up in protest over being treated on the same level as a commoner.

“The fact is that, out of everyone in the temple, only Myne and I have enough mana to perform this ritual. An apprentice shrine maiden would never be here if we had a blue priest who could perform the ritual. I can express nothing but exasperation at anyone too foolish to realize that. Myne is here as an apprentice blue shrine maiden. She is here to perform the ritual. You did not harm any mere commoner. You harmed an apprentice shrine maiden who has been given blue robes.”

The High Priest repeatedly emphasized that I was an apprentice blue shrine maiden. Taken another way, that was a sign that he would not be able to punish Shikza if I were indeed “any mere commoner.” I squeezed the blue robes that I wore to protect myself and, although it was far too late for me to be doing so, thanked Benno for wisely advising me to negotiate for blue robes.

“You ignored orders, abandoned your duty, harmed who you were supposed to protect, allowed a second unnecessary trombe to appear, disturbed the Knight’s Order, and gave everyone more work. Furthermore, the Order’s honor has been tainted now that one of its knights has harmed the one they were assigned to protect. Do not think you will get off lightly. The Archduke will inform you of your punishment before long.”

The High Priest looked away from the two of them and turned to face the lined up knights. He then coldly looked down at Karstedt, who was kneeling in front of them all.

“Karstedt. As the captain of the Knight’s Order, you are responsible for selecting these incompetent guards and training new recruits so poorly that they do not even listen to orders. I will inform you of your punishment at a future date.”

“The failings of the Order are failings of my own. I deeply apologize for the trouble I have given you, Lord Ferdinand.” Karstedt seemed to have been prepared to accept punishment the moment he learned that the High Priest’s anger was justified. He bowed his head before the High Priest calmly without so much as a flinch, and so too did all the kneeling knights behind him.

The Healing Ritual

“Myne, we will finish the ritual while the potion is in effect.”

Once he had finished reprimanding Shikza, the High Priest flourished his cape, touched his right gauntlet, and turned the stone into his white lion thing. The knights all stood up in turn and began bringing out their own creatures to ride.

“Come here.” The High Priest held out his hand. I walked up to him as gracefully as I could, then extended my own hands. He lifted me up and this time I grabbed the lion’s reins so that I wouldn’t lose my balance. After nimbly jumping on behind me, the High Priest raised a hand. “Depart!”

He gripped the reins and the once statue-esque white lion began moving as if it had been given life. It extended its wings far and flapped itself into the air, heading towards the ruins of where the giant trombe had just been rampaging. The trombe from a second ago had sucked the mana it needed out of my blood instead of the surrounding earth, so that was fine. But the giant trombe had left a huge crater where it had been, and if I didn’t perform the Healing Ritual to fill the ground back with mana, not even grass would grow on the crater.

“...I feel that I have wronged you.” The High Priest spoke to me in a quiet voice from behind, perhaps because now that we were in the air he didn’t have to worry about other people hearing him. “I did not intend for you to be hurt, and I did not intend to expose you to such malice. And finally, I did not intend to put you in such a state that a potion was necessary just to give you enough temporary strength to perform the ritual. It was my foolish mistake for not ever expecting the Knight’s Order to go against my orders.”

His tone was dripping with frustration and remorse. The guards meant to ensure everything proceeded smoothly had in fact done the opposite, and he was regretting assigning them to me at all. But he wasn’t responsible for Shikza going berserk, the malicious rumors about me being spread, or even my poor Devouring health.

“It’s not your fault, High Priest.”

“It is. All matters related to you are my responsibility,” he said, his voice firm. Given that the temple could not function without me, commoner or not, he considered it part of his job as High Priest to facilitate my assimilation into the temple. He was indeed the kind of

perfectionist that couldn't trust work to other people and ended up making life harder for himself by trying to do it all on his own.

"Is the potion working, Myne?"

"Yes."

"Good, then. I know very well that the ritual will place a great burden on you. But it is vital that we show the Knight's Order that you are capable of performing your duties as an apprentice shrine maiden. I will protect you. Show them that you are fit to wear the blue robes. Shove it in their faces that you are essential to both the temple and the Knight's Order, the protector of the lands. If the Knight's Order recognizes your importance, you will have more tools to protect yourself."

The High Priest had protected me by stating that I wasn't a normal commoner, I was an apprentice blue shrine maiden. I needed to do my job well enough that they accepted that I was worthy of the position.

"...I'm nervous about it, though. This is the first time I'm performing the ritual. I don't know if I can do it right." I knew I had to do it, but I was terrified that I couldn't. It was my first time performing a ritual.

And yet, the High Priest blew away my worries with a short laugh. "Hmph. You don't have anything to worry about. I will prepare the stage such that the Knight's Order will have no choice but to accept you."

"...What?"

"I only start fights that I know I can win." His chilly voice sent shudders down my spine. It seemed that his anger at his plan being thrown out of order had not faded at all.

"...Um, Damuel was really kind to me, and he did try to save me. He even yelled at Shikza for my sake, so please don't take it all out on him."

The giant trombe had left a large disc of exposed earth in its wake, which made it look like someone had put a massive brown plate on top of the forest.

"It feels like there's enough space to found a farming town here once plants are growing again."

"A farming town here would make it quite difficult for the priests and nobles heading out for the Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. The earth will lose its strength once again without the Spring Prayer," added the High Priest. It certainly would be difficult for the priests and nobles to go all the way deep into the forest to perform the ritual, not to mention the townsfolk who might want to go to town.

The almost-lion descended to the center of the crater, and the High Priest escorted me to the ground. The Knight's Order landed one

by one, their animals returning to their gauntlet as they hit the ground.

Once all the knights were lined up, they took off their helmets and knelt. It seemed that watching the ritual with helmets on was disrespectful to the gods. The High Priest took off his helmet as well, setting it down by his feet. The ground beneath us wasn't the kind of black earth we saw back in the forest. It was reddish-brown and dry dirt, like you might find in a school's sports ground.

"High Priest, the staff." Arno held out a staff a bit longer than a full-grown man, which the High Priest took.

It was a divine instrument—the symbol of the Goddess of Water Flutrane—and it was necessary for this ritual. The staff was made of gold and the tip held a large magic stone, clear green and about the size of an adult's palm gleaming in the sunlight. The handle was dotted with magic stones lined up next to each other, and most were colored. At a glance, I could see that it was charged up with plenty of mana.

"Shikza," the High Priest called out to the knights. Shikza rushed this way, his armor clanking as he speed-walked. The High Priest faced him and held out the divine staff. "You will perform the ritual."

Shikza blinked in confusion. The High Priest looked down at him coldly, then gave an exaggerated sigh. "You abandoned your duties, did you not? You must have plenty of mana in reserve. My initial plan was to begin the ritual myself to show how it is done, but due to your tomfoolery giving me extra work, I do not have mana to spare."

...That's a lie! You definitely have tons of mana to spare! The unfathomably foul-tasting potion he had concocted was as effective as one would expect from how hard he sacrificed the flavor. There was no way he didn't have spare mana after drinking it.

"Surely you are capable of this. Show Myne the power of a real noble." The High Priest basically forced the divine staff into Shikza's hands. He was clearly thrown off by this unexpected development, but the moment he noticed me looking at him, he glared at me and straightened his back.

"O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side." Shikza began chanting the prayer in a loud, clear voice. The large stone in the staff began to shine, and the ground around Shikza began to darken with the bottom of the staff at the center. Not long after the ground darkened, fresh green buds started to pop out.

I couldn't help but let out an excited "Wow!" I never thought that just gripping the divine instrument and chanting a memorized prayer would bring about such palpable change to the earth. It was like a science experiment I had seen in an educational video back in my

Urano days.

The earth changed color as it was filled with mana, plants blooming bit by bit. But the growing circle stopped once it hit a radius of about ten meters.

“Keep going. The crater is far from filled.” The High Priest slammed Shikza once he tried to stop, refusing to allow him to let go of the staff, which continued to drain his mana as long as he was holding it. Shikza’s head was getting heavy from all the mana that had been drained out of him, and soon he collapsed right onto his knees.

“Hmph. Despite all your arrogance, this was the best you could do. I see that the Knight’s Order truly had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to fill out their ranks.” Without even looking at Shikza, the High Priest grabbed the wavering staff before it fell. He then beckoned me over while holding it up. “You are the only one left, Myne. It is time to do your job.”

I planted my feet far apart to steady myself and grabbed a hold of the staff, which was so large it would fall over if I relaxed my grip for a moment. Shikza had given a live demonstration of what to do, which eased my fears about messing up.

...The High Priest was basically telling me to show off, so I guess I should pour in as much mana as I can? I tightened my grip on the staff and lowered my eyes, breathing deeply. I took off the top of the box I usually kept tightly shut to contain my mana, allowing it to go free inside my body. I could feel the overflowing mana surge towards the staff in search of an exit.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength. Grant me the power to heal your sister, the God of Earth Geduldh, who has been wounded by those who serve evil.” The green magic stone embedded in the staff shone brightly. My mana whirled around me, kicking up a swirl of wind with me at its center. The wind lifted up my hair while my robes fluttered.

“I pray that holy music be granted, casting ripples of the highest order. May I be filled with the royal color to mine own heart’s content.” My mana burst into the staff, seeping into the earth through the staff’s magic stone. The circle of dark earth shot outwards, with fresh greenery sprouting and blooming before my eyes.



“...You may stop. That is more than enough.” At the High Priest’s prompting, I stopped the flow of mana and locked it back into the box. The staff immediately stopped shining. Before I knew it, the entire crater had been covered in grass that reached up to my ankles.

“Is that all I need to do, High Priest?”

“Yes, the earth is now filled with mana. In fact... you went too far.” That last bit was a quiet murmur, so quiet I almost didn’t hear it. I tilted my head in confusion, but the High Priest just shook his head and turned to face the Knight’s Order. I turned around as well and saw that all of the knights were stunned, their faces painted with utter disbelief. All of them had wide eyes, and many of their jaws had actually dropped.

...Um, what? Why are they all looking at me like that? I went a little hard since the High Priest told me to show off, but um... maybe I did go too far? Their gawking looks made me feel so uncomfortable that I slid behind the High Priest, fidgeting. But he stepped in front of me and cleared his throat.

“This is the apprentice shrine maiden accepted by both the temple and the Archduke. Are there any here who object to that decision?”

The knights came back to their senses and all lowered their eyes, keeping their silence. They all stayed in formation with their eyes on the ground. That was probably how they conveyed their lack of objections. As I blinked in surprise, the High Priest nodded.

“...No objections, then. Good.” Only when the High Priest gave a dismissive “hmpf” did the knights look up. But their expressions of surprise were now gone, replaced with the sharp eyes of predators who had found their prey.

“Eek?!” They looked so scary that I had to swallow an actual scream. I froze up beneath the weight of so many hungry stares. It felt like they had concluded I was prey to hunt and devour. The moment I let my guard down, they would bite. I was the mouse being chased by hungry snakes.

With trembling legs, I took a stealthy step to the side to hide completely behind the High Priest’s back.

“I forgot to mention,” the High Priest continued, “but the apprentice is in my custody. I believe you understand the significance of that.” His words calmed their carnivorous stares at once. That was a relief, but out of all of them I was the only one who didn’t actually understand the significance of that.

“Good. Now, let us return.” Everyone immediately began to prepare to leave while I alone stood blinking in confusion. Arno took the divine instrument from the High Priest while Fran made sure I was okay. The knights put their helmets back on, called forth their

animals, and prepared to ride.

“Come here, Myne.” The High Priest, standing next to the collapsed Shikza with Karstedt, beckoned me over. I held back the urge to run, instead walking to them gracefully. “Myne, do you demand any form of apology for what occurred?” The High Priest lowered just his eyes to look at Shikza. He was asking that since I was the victim, but his expression made it clear he wanted me to answer that no, I did not have any demands. But well, I sure did.

“I do.” The moment I said that, the High Priest’s brows furrowed hard and he glared at me. Again, I could hear his silent message loud and clear, but I chose to ignore it. “I request new ceremonial robes.”

My request must have come out of left field for both of them, as they looked down at me with surprise written on their faces. I spread out my arms so they could see my robes more clearly. There were gaping holes that let you see right through my sleeves as they shook in the breeze.

“Please order a replacement robe exactly like this one. It was new and made just for this occasion, so it was very expensive. A commoner such as myself does not have the money to prepare multiple pairs of ceremonial robes in a row.”

“I see. They certainly are quite damaged.” Karstedt immediately understood me with a wry smile, but the High Priest looked suspicious, as if something about my words had thrown him off.

“...Why did you clarify that they should be exactly like your existing robes?”

“These robes were custom made with specific instructions. I asked them to make it such that I could continue to wear them as I grew older, but they ended up destroyed before I could even perform my first ritual. It’s a true shame.” I exaggerated the weight of my plight, and Karstedt cackled.

“I see that even young women have a love for clothes,” he said mirthfully. “Very well, I will order new robes for you.” Karstedt promised to order me new robes as punishment for his, Shikza’s, and Damuel’s wrongdoing. That was all I wanted.

“I am extremely grateful. I recommend that you order the new robes from the Gilberta Company. As I cannot participate in rituals without the ceremonial robes, I request that you have them work at an expedient speed to finish before winter.”

“Winter? Why then?” Karstedt raised an eyebrow, and the High Priest rubbed his temples.

“The rituals to offer up mana are carried out in the winter. The blue priests and the High Bishop will certainly be snide if she does not have ceremonial robes for the rituals, saying that commoners cannot even prepare robes for themselves, among other things. Regardless of

the fact that she lacks robes through no fault of her own,” explained the High Priest, and I nodded solemnly. I wanted to rock the boat as little as possible. The Knight’s Order might not mind my robes being full of holes the next time a trombe pops up, but I needed proper robes for the winter rituals.

“Understood. I will take care of your robes for you. Anything else?”

“New ceremonial robes are all I need. Anything beyond that can be done in accordance with the rules of the Knight’s Order. I would not like to earn more ire than I already have.”

“Hm. A wise decision indeed. I will handle the rest internally, then,” said Karstedt with a satisfied nod. I knelt and bowed my head in thanks.

“Geez! Why are there all these big holes?! The robes were just finished!”

“Fran, what in the world happened to Sister Myne?!”

When I returned to the temple, Delia let out a shriek at my raggedy robes and Rosina staggered back with a hand over her mouth.

“Many things happened, but due to the situation’s involvement with the Knight’s Order, I am not allowed to speak of it.” Fran dodged their queries without revealing anything.

I changed in a hurry so Lutz wouldn’t see my messed-up robes, but it seemed he knew I had been in danger. He came to the temple not long after I got back, and the second he saw me he rushed up to me and said “Myne! I’m glad you’re okay!” He immediately checked the back of my hand and made sure I didn’t have a fever or any other wounds. Somehow, he knew some or all of what had happened to me.

“Lutz, why do you know so much?”

“Out of nowhere, I suddenly heard you crying for help. You said ‘Lutz, help me!’ and like, a vision of what was happening to you popped up in my head. I wanted to go help, but I had no idea where you were. I sure freaked the heck out.”

On top of that, apparently the mental video he saw of me being wrapped up by the trombe ended with the High Priest turning his black arrow into a shining baton and healing my hand wound. He had spent the last few hours worried out of his mind, having no idea whether I had been rescued or not.

“Sorry for scaring you, Lutz.”

“Hey, you’re the one who was in a scary spot, not me... But anyway, what even was with that?”

I immediately concluded that the blue light I saw at the time was responsible for what Lutz experienced. I looked at my hand, though I had already given the ring back to the High Priest, and stared at it

while thoughts of everything that had happened today stirred through my head.

"I'm just glad you're safe, Myne." Lutz hugged me tight, putting his mouth right next to my ear as he spoke. His worry for me was sincere, unfettered by thoughts of status, rules, or mana. His warmth finally made me break down and drop the tough act. I knew he would be there for me, just like I would be there for him, and sometimes, you just needed support like that.

"...Noble society was really scary," I murmured, clinging tightly to Lutz.

Naturally, I ended up bedridden after helping the Knight's Order. I was in bed for days, but that was normal for this season, so my family didn't say anything about it. I just wished the High Priest wasn't so obsessed with calling it his responsibility even though it really wasn't.

It was very late autumn by the time I could move again, and it was finally getting cold enough that using the river to make paper was impossible.

"We'll have to drop by the Gilberta Company on our way back," I said as we arrived at the temple. Fran was waiting at the gate.

"Sister Myne, the High Priest has summoned you to discuss an urgent matter. He has said to come to his room as soon as you arrive, regardless of your harspiel practice."

After changing into my blue robes in my room, I headed to the High Priest's room. Today of all days I would have liked to practice the harspiel. Despite walking with heavy feet, I inevitably reached my destination.

"There you are, Myne. I suppose Fran conveyed my message? Follow me." The High Priest walked to the hidden room, his expression a bit harder than usual. He would definitely be lecturing me. I pressed a hand against my stomach while entering the hidden room through the door he opened.

"Give me all the documents," said the High Priest with an outstretched hand once I started pushing the documents to the side of the bench like usual. I gathered them all up and handed them to the High Priest. He set them onto his desk and brought over his chair, just like always. But I could see a decorative gold loop with a red gemstone embedded in it, plus a bottle small enough to be hidden in the palm of a hand.

"Drink this, Myne." The High Priest opened his hand and held out the bottle to me. The glass was a bit thick, but not so opaque that I couldn't see the red liquid sloshing inside of it.

"What is it?"

"A potion I concocted myself. It will improve the flow of mana

within you, which will be important for this magic tool. Swallow it no matter how repulsive the taste might be.”

He thrust the bottle right into my face, his tone making it clear that he wouldn't take no for an answer. That really made me not want to drink the potion. I hadn't forgotten how wretched his last potion had tasted. His eyes narrowed as I faltered, and his lips curved into a slight grin.

“Would you prefer me to hold your nose and force it down your throat?”

...He was serious. The High Priest was the kind of person who would do that in the blink of an eye if he felt it necessary.

I shook my head hard and took the bottle from him, timidly bringing it to my mouth while fearing what flavor it might have this time. It didn't smell that odd, at least. But taking it slow would just make me suffer the taste longer. I pumped myself up and gulped it all down at once.

“...Hm?” It didn't taste bad at all. Truth be told, it was actually a little sweet and tasty.

“High Priest, it tasted fine to me. It was sweet and tasty. I would really like it if you made that rejuvenation potion taste this good.” I handed him the empty bottle while thinking about how murderously bad the last one had been, but he just opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“It tasted sweet to you?”

“Yes. Should it not have?”

“...Well. That is not important right now. Put this on, and ensure the gem makes contact with your forehead.” The High Priest held the golden loop with a red gemstone. Knowing there was no point in arguing, I took it and put it on with the gemstone touching my forehead. Just like the magic ring, it shrunk in size and fit against my head perfectly, like a circlet.

“High Priest, you said this was a magic tool, right?”

“Yes. I asked the Archduke whether I could borrow it, and at last it arrived.”

“Um, what does it d— Mmm? Wh-What?” I was suddenly hit with a heavy sense of drowsiness. My head spun and my eyelids started to droop all on their own. “Wh-What? Why? I'm so sleepy...”

“Lie on your side and allow yourself to sleep. There is no need for you to resist.” I could only faintly hear the High Priest. I was hearing his words just fine, but my mind was so foggy it was taking too much time to understand what he was saying. Since he said I didn't need to resist, I decided to just entrust my body to the sleepiness and assume my normal sleeping posture. I took out my hair stick, took off my shoes, and lay on the bench. Once I was on my side, I immediately felt

my consciousness fall into the dark abyss.

“Good... night...” I used the last of my strength to squeeze out a goodnight. I could feel the High Priest brushing aside my bangs. He must have been close to me, as his voice echoed like his mouth was right next to my ear.

“This is a magic tool that searches through the memories of witnesses and suspected criminals to ensure that they are telling no falsehoods. It is reserved for grave crimes which require the Archduke himself to intervene, and I will use it to see for myself this world of dreams that you speak of.”

Epilogue

Ferdinand quietly looked down at Myne, who had fallen deeply asleep due to the potion and magic tool. He picked up the hair stick that had fallen from her limp hand. It was a simple stick carved from wood, but only Myne bundled her hair with sticks like it. He had thought at first that it was a style among commoners, but even the many hairpins that he had begun to see at baptism ceremonies were just thrust into the hair. Nobody bound their hair with them like Myne did with her sticks.

Myne was a mysterious girl. She largely behaved as if she had already received some kind of high-quality education, and yet she rarely thought things through or carried herself with proper caution. She spoke of a “Melvil Dewey,” who by all investigation seemed not to exist and knew of a system of classifying documents that did not exist elsewhere. She invented everything she needed, one after another. She restructured the orphanage and gave the children work, the fruits of which were used to pay for their food. She loved books from the bottom of her heart, to such an extent she even created bibles for children.

Under any angle, she was abnormal. Not even a strictly educated noble child could do what Myne had done. Her actions were not those of a small child who had just finished her baptism. She was always strange, though her efforts were not focused in a harmful direction.

Had she merely been a curiosity, the Archduke would not have lent Ferdinand the magic tool. However, Myne had displayed an unfathomable amount of mana during the Healing Ritual earlier. A normal Devouring child could never fill that much drained land with mana so quickly. To be honest, as it stood, she had more mana than the Archduke himself. It was impossible to tell how much mana she would have when she was older.

A commoner girl with a fearsome amount of mana and the knowledge of countless inventions, each worth a fortune, would inevitably become the seed of a war between nobles for possession of her. By declaring that she was in his custody, Ferdinand had secured her safety within the city to some degree, but it was only a matter of time before nobles from other regions learned of her existence. At the moment, he could not say for sure whether he could protect her from them, or whether she was truly worth going that far to protect.

Which was exactly why the Archduke had told him to use the magic tool. Search through her memories to see the land of dreams she spoke of in the past. Judge her worth, and determine whether she means them harm or not.

“At the very least, I would hope to confirm that she means no harm...” It was simple to view a criminal’s memories and confirm whether they committed the crime or not, but in Myne’s case, he would have to determine from her memories how much she was worth and what her future intentions were. That would be extremely difficult.

“...And most of all, she will not forgive me for this.” He was using a magic tool to investigate her memories. There was no doubt that she would raise her guard against him and avoid his presence when at all possible.

In noble society where one had to hide their emotions and make every move with the utmost caution so as to not walk into a trap, there were none who had their thoughts written on their face like Myne. Even in the temple, Ferdinand had to constantly think about how close an individual was to the High Bishop and how much he could trust them. And yet, he did not have to question Myne. Although she was at times a headache, she made her thoughts and feelings clear thanks to her transparent nature. He did not need to be on guard around her, and that was comfortable.

I seem to have grown unexpectedly fond of Myne, thought Ferdinand with a sigh before putting on his head a ring identical to the one on hers. He then knelt beside the bench Myne was on and pressed the gem on his circlet to hers. He poured mana into her gently, synchronizing their minds. It was normal for the body to fiercely resist outside mana, and while she had in fact drank a potion meant to make the synchronization easier, she presented no resistance at all to his mana. That was certainly helpful for his mission, but Ferdinand was hit with the urge to chastise her, to tell her to protect herself a little and not accept others so easily. He clicked his tongue and spoke to her.

“Myne, can you hear me?”

“Wha? I can hear you, High Priest. Where are you?” Ferdinand had expected her to be afraid or disgusted, but instead she reacted normally like nothing was odd at all. He once again fought back the urge to chastise her.

“I am synchronizing our minds right now. You had far more mana than I anticipated. You say that you were educated in the world of dreams, and it is now necessary for me to determine whether you intend to bring harm or good upon this land. Forgive me, but I will be investigating your memories.”

“Okay, that’s fine. I don’t mind,” responded Myne casually, and nobody in the world could blame Ferdinand for reeling in disbelief. She showed no resistance whatsoever to someone intending to look through her memories.

“To be clear, I will be seeing your actual memories. Do you truly not mind? Is that not an uncomfortable breach of privacy to you?”

“Well, I mean, it doesn’t feel great, but... you seeing my memories is the safest bet for me to stay alive. I would much prefer this to being executed for nonexistent treason. And I mean, you’re doing me a favor by using this magic tool on me instead of just executing me outright, aren’t you?” said Myne.

Due to their minds being synchronized, Ferdinand could tell that she really meant it. Should he praise her for her wisdom or scold her for not being more suspicious...? Likely the latter, but the lecture could wait. The synchronization seemed like it would be quite tiring, and the sooner he finished it the better.

“In that case, would you take me to the world of dreams you spoke of? We should be able to go there if you bring up memories of it.”

“Wait, does that mean I can go anywhere I want?”

...Why?! Why is Myne so excited despite the fact that her memories are being searched?! Myne’s eager feelings of excitement were sent straight to Ferdinand, who felt nothing but worry about them. This is bad. I feel that this is quite bad indeed. Will I be able to stop Myne if she loses control? If I do not steel my mind, she might end up dragging me all across her memories.

“Myne, you need to show me only what I came here to see. First, show me the source of your knowledge.”

“No problem! I’ll start by taking you to my beloved library!” Myne replied in a bright voice, and suddenly Ferdinand was standing before a large, unfamiliar building. He wanted to look up to see just how tall it was, but he and Myne were sharing the same eyes, and what he could see was limited by where Myne was looking. What he could see was a beautifully paved stone road, and what he could feel was the gentle wind on her skin. Judging by the lack of filth and the resulting smell, they weren’t in a lower city. The building must have been somewhere in a Noble’s Quarter.

“Aaah, it’s been so long!” Myne’s voice echoed and through her eyes Ferdinand saw that they were moving into the building. She was waxing nostalgic while skipping into the building without any hesitation. There was no doubt whatsoever that this was the world she spoke of. An unbelievably clear glass door slid to the side with a whirring noise, despite the fact that she hadn’t touched it or poured mana into it.

“Myne, does magic exist here too? I seem to recall you saying that the Dewey Decimal System lacked a section for mana.”

“Aaah... There’s no magic here. This is an automatic door that operates on different principles.” They lacked magic, but had something that worked like magic. That was strange and intriguing.

“What country is this, Myne? It does not seem to be any country I am aware of.”

“It’s called Japan. I used to live here in the past, until one day I was crushed to death by books. When I woke up, I was Myne.”

Ferdinand could hardly understand what Myne was saying. But he could feel that she was speaking the truth with no intention to hide anything. It was the first time Ferdinand had ever found it difficult to understand someone precisely because they were being so honest.

“...You died, from being crushed by books?” The idea of her being crushed to death was equally hard for him to believe. He couldn’t even imagine there being enough books to literally bury someone. But suddenly, he found himself in the middle of massive bookcases stuffed full of books.

“...Where is this?”

“The local public library I used to always go to.” It was a library where books lined shelves as far as the eye could see. Even the library in the Royal Academy didn’t have this many books. Certainly, with this many books, being crushed to death by them would not be impossible.

“These are all... books?”

“Uh huh, this is a library. Oh, but libraries have started carrying (videos), (CDs), and (DVDs) too lately. Aaah, I’m so happy. This is it! This is the paradise I’ve been chasing after!”

Ferdinand could feel that Myne really was so happy she could cry. She immediately raced past the rows of bookcases, perhaps heading to her favorite spot. There was a soft carpet covering the library’s floor, stifling her footsteps entirely. Ferdinand felt dizzy just imagining how much it would have cost to build this library.

...I see. Given that she loves books this much and has memories of a library this grand, I can somewhat understand why she began to sob after finding the temple’s book room. It seemed that in this world books were very beloved, in contrast to his own world. The books here were not chained, and Myne was picking up each book she wanted to read, each made with designs like the ones she had made in the temple. There were men, women, the elderly, and children in the library. Some wore fine garments that made their wealth clear, some wore raggedy clothing that made their poverty clearer. All of the clothing he saw as Myne made her way through the library was fairly colorful, but even the ones with raggedy clothing were touching books. In

Ferdinand's eyes, it was unthinkable that poor people would be allowed to touch books.

"Myne, is that woman out of her mind? Should madwomen like her be allowed to touch books?"

"A madwoman? Who?" Myne looked around the corridor.

"To the left. That woman is exposing her knees despite being an adult. She must be too poor to afford more cloth, but she is dyeing her clothes. Why doesn't she just stop dyeing her clothes? I simply do not understand."

"In this world, women can wear skirts of any length. Everyone's just wearing the clothes they want, don't worry about it. But still, this dream is just amazing. I can feel and even smell things."

Myne, having quickly lost interest in the woman, returned her gaze to the bookshelf. The lined-up books were similar to the paper books Myne had made, but they were more beautiful and in larger quantities than Ferdinand could have ever imagined.

Myne, after deliberately looking from one end of the bookcase to the other, took one book off of the shelf. After hugging it tightly, she began inhaling its scent. Due to their minds being synchronized, Ferdinand also smelled the scent of paper and ink while Myne's satisfaction was forced onto him. He wanted to end the synchronization right there.

Myne eagerly sat in a comfy chair at the end of the bookcase and began reading. It wasn't just a board with a sheet strung over it. The chair was actually soft and extremely pleasant to sit on. Ferdinand had felt nothing like it before.

Still, Myne's sight only let him see the book, the floor, and a bookshelf. He could see the open pages, but they were filled with tightly placed letters he could not recognize. The book had probably been printed in the manner Myne discussed earlier. It was black and white, just like hers.

"Do the books in your dream world not have pictures?"

"Wha?! Huh? Who is... Oh, right. It's just you, High Priest." Myne let out a surprised noise after Ferdinand spoke to her.

...This fool is unbelievable. She is completely absorbed in her own world, despite the fact that I am watching.

"Ummm, pictures, right? If you want to see pictures, there are (artbooks) and (photo albums) here too." Myne took out a large book filled with colorful pictures. The illustrations were so colorful and detailed it was hard to believe. Ferdinand was enraptured by their brilliance, but Myne shut the book in the blink of an eye.

"Can I keep reading now, High Priest?"

"No, you may not. Is this a children's picture book, like the one you made?"

“This is an (artbook), a collection of art drawn by a famous person. The kid’s corner is over here,” said Myne as she resumed walking through the library.

“This is a picture book, and it’s what Cinderella is actually supposed to be.” Comparing the art of the picture book to the story Myne brought him just confused Ferdinand more. No human in the world had eyes that dominated the majority of their face, nor would one dress like that with hair like that. Or, well, perhaps a human like that did exist in this world.

“...The story seems even more comical now that it has art attached, but regardless. Even this book has quite vivid colors. You need to put color in your books as well.”

“I would like to, you know. It’s just that ink is so expensive. I’m trying to get it made, but it’s not easy. I wish I could just buy all the stuff I need here,” said Myne, and suddenly they teleported to a place where strange things were lined up on shelves. Not books this time, but oddly shaped... *things* covered in letters and various colors.

“Oh, now we’re in an arts and crafts store. High Priest, if I buy things here can I take them with me when I wake up?”

“Of course not, fool. Where are we?”

“An arts and crafts store that my mom often took me to. This is paint.” Be it books or paint, Myne’s world was overflowing with all manner of things. The quantity and quality was enormous. He only knew what he had seen through Myne, but the wealth of culture in her world was enough to send his mind reeling.

“There certainly is a wide variety of paint available.”

“Uh huh. There’s all kinds of stuff here. Though I like bookstores more than arts and crafts stores.” The second Myne said that, they shifted locations once again. It seemed that Myne’s thoughts were as erratic as her behavior. Or rather, it would be safe to say that her behavior was erratic because her thoughts were.

“Where is this?” It was a place with shelves full of books, just like the library. But unlike the library, loud music was playing, and it was so bright it made Ferdinand want to squint.

“A store that sells new books. Eheheh, time to check for the new releases... Wait, nooooo! I can only see the ones I remembeeeer!” Myne shouted something incomprehensible and got depressed out of nowhere. Being forced to experience the rapid ups and downs of her emotions was exhausting. Perhaps she collapsed so often due to the intensity of her mood swings.

“Myne, why is it so bright despite the fact that we are inside a building?”

“Oh, that’s because of the (electricity).” Myne looked up, and above the sea of bookshelves was a row of tiny suns, shining bright

white light.

“How do those things operate?”

“Umm, they turn on once you flip a (light switch). But just like I wouldn’t understand an explanation about magic, you wouldn’t understand an explanation of how it works without doing a lot of research first.”

Myne’s eyes once again locked onto the bookshelf. If she didn’t look around, he would only be able to see books. He could see interesting, unknown things out of the corners of her eyes, but she made no move to look at them. Their synchronization was hardly proving to be fruitful.

“Myne, it is about time for you to stop looking at books.”

“Awww, but why? I just want to see books. I can’t have dreams this realistic on my own.” Myne was nothing but unsatisfied. She truly only had eyes for books.

Ferdinand never would have thought that peering into her memories would show him nothing but books. If he didn’t force her to think about something else, this journey would end with nothing but more knowledge about her world’s books.

“Myne, do you remember why I am here?”

“I would like to forget, but... fine. What do you want to see?” Myne let out an extremely heavy sigh. Ferdinand thought about it, then asked what he was personally most curious about.

“Very well. I would like to see the place where you were educated.”

Their surroundings shifted in an instant. They were inside a somewhat small room with desks lined up from corner to corner, each with identically dressed people sitting at them and writing. On the top of the small desks were books with strange letters and symbols on them, bundles of beautifully thin paper, and metal boxes with several colored sticks inside. The people occasionally looked up as they wrote letters with the sticks, using them like pens. At the front of the room was an adult, writing something on a large slate while presumably explaining what he was writing. That was likely the teacher of the school building.

“Myne, what is happening here?”

“We’re sitting in class. This is a memory from (high school), I think? It’s math class. Being here again is nostalgic, but I never really liked math. I liked Japanese class more, I think.” Their surroundings shifted again. They were in the same room, but now a somewhat older woman was walking around the room while reading a book.

“Everyone in the country learns in a place like this. We start before baptism age and keep going to adulthood.” The room changed again and again as she spoke. Each room looked similar with students

studying, but their age and the instructor teaching them changed each time. They really did learn from childhood to adulthood.

“Do you do nothing but study?”

“Umm, there’s a lot of subjects we study. Some are more hands-on.” Their environment shifted rapidly. They were outside where identically dressed students were running around a track. A nearly naked man was diving into water. A group of students were playing a song he had never heard before on strange flutes.

“So you received musical training as well...”

“That’s right. Though schools don’t go too far with music. The song I played on the harpsiel wasn’t actually one I made myself, it was a song I learned here.”

Now Ferdinand knew why she could play a song on the first harpsiel she had touched. Myne’s exceptional talents were thanks to this world’s knowledge and the strict education she received here. It made sense that she would be completely different from normal commoners.

“The country’s educational program was put in place by the government, so everyone knows how to read and do math. I want to introduce this kind of education to the orphanage so everyone there can learn to read, write, and do simple math.”

“For what purpose?” Ferdinand could not understand the point in teaching everyone to read. Myne responded to his confusion without missing a beat.

“The more people who know how to read, the more people there are to read books. Not to mention that people need to know how to read to write books in the first place. If I want to enjoy a life of reading books in your world, I’ll need to start by teaching people to read.”

Up until now, Ferdinand had to some degree questioned if there was some dark underside to her actions, some plot driving her forward, but now that they were synchronized he knew for sure that she was utterly devoted to reading books with nothing more to it than that. In some ways that was relieving, but in other ways that made his head hurt. In any case, many of his doubts and questions had been answered by seeing her memories.

“...I had thought you learned your letters exceptionally fast, but I see now that is because you are used to learning.”

“Used to learning? Well, I suppose so. I never really thought about it like that, but I’ve been studying for my whole life. Plus, I wanted to read books so much that I just threw myself at learning letters.”

Ferdinand absorbed every inch of what he could see. The students were all calmly studying together, organized and wearing the same clothes. The building was clean without any visible filth anywhere.

“Myne, this building is quite pretty.”

“That’s because it was just recently built. But what’s really great about this school is that it has the biggest library out of all the nearby schools. It’s why I applied to go here.” Their surroundings changed into a library once again. It was no doubt the school library she had been so happily talking about. There were many old books here, as evident by the distinctive dusty smell in the air. Myne was happily inhaling it all. Ferdinand was fairly tired of smelling books by that point.

“Myne, enough with the libraries. Take me outside.” Their surroundings morphed into a quiet, breezy garden. There was stone pavement, grassy lawns, and flowerbeds next to lined-up trees.

“Is this inside a Noble’s Quarter?”

“Mmm, not exactly, but something like that. I think all of Japan is more like the Noble’s Quarter than the lower city. There’s stuff just like magic tools all over the country, after all.” The idea of a world having things like magic tools without having magic itself intrigued Ferdinand.

“Oh? Like what?”

“Well. There’s our vehicles, for instance.” Myne looked up and pointed at a white thing in the sky. It was flying high in the sky while making incredibly loud noise. She then turned to the side, looking at clumps of metal speeding along roads next to each other.

“What are those? It must take quite a lot of mana to move that much metal at such high speeds.”

“Like I said, these aren’t magic tools running off mana. They run off something else. Honestly, gems changing shape from mana and moving around is a lot weirder than this.” Now that she mentioned it, magic stones changing shape and moving certainly would seem odd to Myne if she had no prior knowledge of magic. She reacted with constant surprise when they were traveling with the Knight’s Order.

“What other such devices exist here?”

“Mmm, I guess most (electronics) will be in a home?” murmured Myne, and then they stood inside a building.

A thin lace cloth was covering the windows. Using a lace pattern that elaborate for mere curtains indicated that they were in the home of an archnoble. There was faint light streaming through the curtains, but there was also a so-called “lightbulb” brightening the room. There was a leather couch, and in front of it was a tall black rectangle on top of a short cabinet.

...*What?* Myne’s heartbeat suddenly shot up in speed. A cold sweat ran down her back and the blood was draining from her face. Myne’s heart was enveloped in stress, anxiety, and fear. And yet deep inside there was also happiness and nostalgia swelling together in

anticipation. Her storm of emotions hit Ferdinand so hard his head spun.

“What is wrong, Myne? Did something happen?”

“This is my home’s living room. It’s so nostalgic it... it just kind of hurts.” Myne spoke in a raspy voice while clutching her chest. Ferdinand could tell she was close to tears.

He had mostly ignored it the first time she said it, since her attention was so focused on books, but Myne had said that she had become Myne in his world after dying here. In which case, it made sense that returning to her old home would be emotional. However, he couldn’t allow himself to be dragged around forever by Myne’s emotions.

Ferdinand coughed to focus himself, then spoke to Myne. “That shelf has quite a lot of things on it. What are they?”

“...That’s my mom’s arts and crafts. She’s curious about everything, but she gives up fast, so she would always make one or two of something then start charging ahead onto her next thing. Even though she’s not good enough to make anything that great without practicing more...”

So she said, but Myne lovingly reached out to touch them in a way that belied her dismissive words. “This is a (coaster) made from lace and this is a hairpin. The Gilberta Company is actually selling these hairpins as a product now. The fancy hair stick I made was based on this style.”

Ferdinand remembered the hair stick Myne had worn when assisting the Knight’s Order. Hers was of a higher quality, but it did resemble the hairpin on the shelf.

“These baskets were woven from (ad pamphlets) that were rolled up into sticks. The experience of making it really came in handy when I made baskets for winter handiwork. I made the bag I always carry around the same way. But Mom got bored halfway through, so I had to finish it.” Myne pointed at the basket with pursed lips.

“These are doll clothes and stuffed animals, though I know they all look pretty bad. The white and round one was supposed to be a (snowman), but she only ever finished the head. Here’s a piece of (cross-stitch) art she never finished, a (patchwork) tapestry...”

The unshapely basket seemed to be storage for all sorts of unfinished things, which Myne took out one by one while thinking about the past. Their surroundings changed with each one, taking them through time and place where a black-haired woman was either encouraging Myne to do something or giving up on something. That black-haired woman was likely Myne’s previous mother.

“This art is the same way,” said Myne as she left the room and entered a narrow hall. She touched some rectangular thing, and

suddenly the hall lit up.

“What in the?!”

“Oh, that was (electricity). It’s the same thing you saw in the bookstore.” Myne looked up and pointed at a white light much smaller than what he had seen before. Something similar to mana must have been coursing through the rectangle.

The now-bright hall had many pieces of art hanging from the walls. Each was clumsily made, enough that Ferdinand could agree with Myne calling her mom not very good.

“They’re all over the place, aren’t they? There’s (watercolor), (oil paintings), and a (nihonga) she made after saying the other paintings weren’t good because of the materials. She ended up trying to simplify with (colored pencils), but ultimately just gave up on art altogether. She went for (calligraphy) next, since she thought just letters would be manageable. She brought me with her to tea ceremonies and flower arranging, saying I would need the experience for when I became a bride. Though she always gave up first and stopped going to classes.”

Myne laughed and wiped away tears from beneath her eyes. Ferdinand could feel the indescribable nostalgia and love brimming within her chest. They were feelings that he, estranged from his family as he was, did not know for himself.

“There was a time when we tried making everything ourselves to save money and be more in tune with nature. She got so into it I sometimes wished she would just leave me alone, but... it’s thanks to her dragging me around that I can live as Myne now.”

According to her, she had first made the rinsham, soap, hide glue, ink, and so on here. Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke, distorting her vision.

“I’m sorry, High Priest. It’s just been so long...” Myne put a hand beneath her eyes as she ran into a small room. She picked up a soft, fluffy piece of cloth and stood in front of a porcelain bowl buried in a cabinet with a metal rod sticking out of it. She then grabbed onto a roundish handle stuck on the metal rod and twisted it.

“What?! Water?!” Water burst out of the metal rod. Myne washed her face and wiped it dry with the soft cloth. It seemed that the soft cloth was used in the same way as towels were.

...The cloth certainly is nice to the touch. If only we could bring it back.

“Myne, what manner of room is this?”

“It’s a (washroom). The bathtub’s over there. The long snake-like thing is a (shower).” The second Myne said that, they were inside the bathtub, now filled with sweet-smelling water. Flashes of bare skin peeked above the milky white hot water as she happily splashed the water onto herself with no regard to how Ferdinand might feel about

that.

“Wow! A bath! (Bath salts) smell so nice. I used to love this (peach) smell.”

“Have you no shame, fool?! Where has your chaste heart as a woman, as a proper lady, gone?!” yelled Ferdinand, unable to look away due to their minds being synchronized. But Myne just shrugged while happily washing her face in the hot water.

“Don’t worry, I don’t mind. I threw away all my shame by day three of living as Myne. You don’t need to worry about it either. I’m a kid, there’s nothing embarrassing about it.”

During her first three days of living as Myne, she had been forcibly changed by a man who she had not yet accepted as her father. No matter how much she wailed or cried in embarrassment, nothing changed. She had to accept her situation, and that was the day her sense of shame died.

“I am not your father!”

“Neither was he back then. Why do you care, High Priest? Surely you don’t think anything of a little girl like me. It’s not a problem.” So she said, but there was a big difference between Ferdinand thinking nothing of her body and her bathing in front of him without a care in the world. He had not expected her to lack shame as much as she lacked caution.

“I feel more worry for your lack of shame than anything else!”

“I’m sure I’ll get my sense of shame back when I’m older. Surely.”

Myne left the bathtub and began washing her hair while humming. She was enveloped in strong-smelling bubbles.

“Aaah, so many bubbles! I love it! They feel so good!” Myne reached for what she called a shower while trembling with bliss and satisfaction. She pulled it this way and water sprayed out of it like rain.

“Nghaaah?!”

“This will wash away the bubbles.” Myne used the shower to wash the bubbles out of her hair. Ferdinand had thought it curious that she would bathe without attendants, but now he knew that one did not need attendants to clean oneself here.

“No matter how much you wash here, it won’t change anything in reality.”

“It’ll definitely improve my mood, though. Tralalalaaa.” After finishing her hair, Myne washed her body with soap that smelled of honey. Its texture, smell, and bubble production seemed to surpass even the soap used by royalty.

Upon finishing cleaning her body and washing everything off with water, Myne’s heart was filled with utter satisfaction.

“You seem to be quite satisfied, Myne, but I would like to move

on from this already.”

Their surroundings morphed such that they were standing in front of the same white tub as before. Myne took something unusual off a nearby shelf. It was blue and glossy, but Ferdinand could not determine what it was made of. It wasn't made of metal, which left nothing he could think of. Myne moved her finger and it suddenly began making a loud, aggravating whirring sound. Air hot enough to scorch the skin blew out of it at the same time.

“What in the world is that?!”

“A hair dryer.”

The washroom even contained an expensive mirror. It seemed that Myne was the daughter of a higher class noble than he had expected.

“High Priest, this is a (rubber) hair tie, and it bundles up hair like this.” Myne, having at some point put away the noisy dryer thing, began somehow stretching and shrinking a “rubber” hair tie. “Do you know of anything that can stretch and shrink like this?”

“...Nothing close to Ehrenfest. I seem to recall that gumka bark felt similar to this.”

“But it does exist?! Where?! How much will it cost to import?”

Her train of thought was the very image of a merchant's.

Ferdinand, seeing Myne attempting to invent a new product in real time, let out a sigh. She was doubtlessly inventing so many new things while attempting to reproduce what she was familiar with from this world. It was easy to imagine how hard she had to fight just to find the proper materials.

“Unfortunately, gumka are located far too north, and as they are a feytrees they must be defeated in combat to acquire their bark. They contain mana like trombes, although they are fought with different methods.”

“Trombes, huh...” said Myne sadly as she loosely bundled up her long, night-sky-colored hair. Ferdinand was so used to her bundling her hair with a stick that the hair tie felt wrong to him.

“You aren't using a hair stick?”

“Aaah, I only made a hair stick because I had no other options. I wouldn't wear a hair stick here unless I was wearing a formal Japanese dress. Mmm, I guess that would be Coming of Age Day here?”

Myne searched through her memories, and their surroundings changed to the middle of a snowy day with cold wind blowing. There was a large crowd of young people wearing garishly colored outfits Ferdinand had not seen before. Since she called this Coming of Age Day, he could guess that this was something similar to the Royal Academy's graduation ceremony. Judging by how beautiful the clothing was and how long the sleeves and hems were, this was no

doubt a gathering of nobles.

“The embroidery I used for my ceremonial robes was actually based on a common pattern on clothing here, known as the (ryuusuimon).”

“Ah, I see. It does look familiar.” A nearby woman wearing a hairpin much more fancy than Myne’s hair stick had on a red dress with wavy water and flowers similar to what were on Myne’s ceremonial robes.

“Myne, is that embroidery?”

“Umm, parts of a long-sleeved (kimono) might be embroidery, but it’s not common for all of a design to be embroidered. With (yuuzen) dyeing, we can draw directly on the cloth.”

“Directly onto the cloth? But how?” Ferdinand could only imagine the pigments seeping into the cloth and spoiling them both.

“...Does that not exist in the Noble’s Quarter either?”

“We change the colors of thread when sewing and embroidering, but I do not know of anything drawing directly onto cloth.”

“Oooh, interesting. Benno should make good money from it, then.” Myne laughed, her mind already filled with profit calculations.

“I see. You are worth as much as the knowledge you have brought with you from here.”

“Most of the things I’ve made are stuff my mom taught me, though.” Myne giggled as she returned to the hall and opened a different door. Inside was a strange room filled with things Ferdinand had never seen before.

“This is our kitchen. We make food and eat it over there. And this is a (gas stove). All you have to do is press this to make fire pop up. Convenient, right?” Myne pressed an oddly designed square and fire appeared with a pop. The blue flame wavered in place. It seemed that the fire in this world was blue. But the strangest thing of all was that the fire didn’t disappear after Myne pulled her hand back. It was easy to start a fire with magic, but to keep it burning you would need wood or a large quantity of mana.

As Ferdinand metaphorically widened his eyes in surprise at the fire being lit without any firewood or mana, Myne pushed the button again. That made the fire disappear instantaneously, as if it had never existed at all.

“...Myne, what is that large white box?”

“That’s a (refrigerator). It keeps food inside of it cold, so it doesn’t go bad as fast.” Myne opened the door and cold air came flowing out. Ferdinand couldn’t recognize any of the colorful things inside, but as he was familiar with the principle of preserving food in the cold, the fridge didn’t surprise him as much as the gas stove did. It was really just the small size of the fridge that impressed him.

“Aaah, an ice house.”

“Wait, you have a (refrigerator)?”

“You did not know? The temple has an ice house larger than this room. Fran should be using it frequently.”

“I thought it was weird that you always had more kinds of milk whenever visitors came, but I never thought it was coming from a (refrigerator). If only I had known,” said Myne, getting blatantly depressed. “I could have made more kinds of food.”

Ferdinand had heard about what food Myne ate from Fran, and although he didn’t understand most of it from description alone, he recalled that there was great variety. She intended to introduce even more variety?

“...I have heard that many different kinds of food are served in your chambers. Is that all food from here as well?”

“That’s right. I’ve been trying to recreate the western food here as much as possible... Oh, I wonder if the food here will taste as good as I remember?! Should I try it? I feel like I’m kind of hungry.”

Myne’s excitement soared and she looked around her. Then, she remembered something, and their surroundings changed again. They were in the same room, but they were facing a different direction, and there was clattering behind them.

“Hurry and eat if you’re hungry. I can’t clean up until you’re finished, remember?” They suddenly heard a woman call out from behind them. Myne’s heart jumped and she froze up, going still like a block of stone. The fact that the woman’s tone felt soft despite her chastising was likely due to Myne’s emotional state.

Myne turned around, clenching a shaking fist tightly, and they both saw a black-haired woman setting plates on a table—the same black-haired woman that had been appearing in Myne’s memories.

“...Mom.”

“I made your favorite tonight. You should eat it before it gets cold.”

Myne gave a small nod and headed for the table, which was big enough to sit four people. The kitchen had lacked any such table moments ago, but Myne’s memories were reproducing the table and a full meal on top of it. The food was so nostalgic that Myne’s eyes got wet just from looking at it, but Ferdinand couldn’t recognize anything. It was mostly black and brown, nothing that looked tasty to him.

“Is this truly food, Myne?”

“Yes. It’s everything I’ve been wanting to eat. There’s fresh white (rice), there’s (miso soup) with (tofu) and (wakame seaweed), garnished with plenty of (scallions). There’s yellow (teriyaki), and my mom’s meat and potato stew with (hijiki). There’s also my mom’s (pickled vegetables).” Myne inhaled deeply to enjoy the full flavor of

her home's food, then quietly clasped her hands with wet eyes. She then lowered her head reverently.

"I'm home." That short phrase was all it took for Myne's heart to be filled with so much warmth and gratitude that it hurt. The moment she dexterously used two red-tipped sticks to bring a bite of food to her mouth, tears escaped her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

"Nnn... It really does taste just like Mom's food..." Myne chewed slowly, savoring the flavor from beginning to end. The gentle flavor filled her mouth from corner to corner. The food was better than anything Ferdinand had ever had, with a storm of feelings hitting him head-on: nostalgia for a mother's cooking, happiness to eat it again, sadness that it was just a dream...

"It tastes great, Mom."

"Oh my, it's not often you praise my cooking. Is there a book you want or something?" The woman was eating in front of Myne, and after widening her eyes in surprise at her daughter's praise, she laughed. Her eyes had the same overflowing, protective love that was there when she was dragging Myne along with her to do arts and crafts.

"There are a lot of books I want, but that's not it. The food just... really is that good." Myne cleaned her plate, leaving nothing behind. She then clasped her hands and once again said "Thank you for the food" with a reverently bowed head.

After finally lifting her head, Myne looked at her mother in the eyes. "I'm sorry, Mom." Myne's mother looked up, and with big tears falling out of her eyes, Myne bowed her head again. "I'm sorry for dying before you. I'm sorry for being so dumb I only noticed how much you loved me after I died. You took such good care of me, you always let me do what I wanted to do, but I died before I could pay you back at all. I'm sorry."

The regret, shame, and nostalgia in Myne's heart hit Ferdinand hard, with her love for her family especially overwhelming him. The storm of emotions was too much for him, and, unable to bear the synchronization any longer, he severed their connection.

Ferdinand, who had been leaning over Myne the entire time, stood up and took a few steps back before collapsing to his knees and shaking his head.

"...I have never felt worse." He had synchronized with Myne too much. Even he had begun to weep, although the emotions weren't his. Myne would be waking up soon now that the synchronization had ended. Ferdinand quickly wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He could see tears dripping out of Myne's eyes as well, despite the fact they were still closed.

Myne's eyelashes fluttered, and slowly she opened her eyes. After

blinking several times, she gingerly lifted her head and looked towards Ferdinand.

“Oh, High Priest. Good morning.” Myne got up while still wiping away her tears with her sleeve. While sitting on the bench she was about eye level with Ferdinand on his knees. She gave a happy smile, her golden eyes still shaky and wet.

“High Priest, thank you for showing me my memories. I think... they were getting more and more blurry, the longer I lived here.” Her buried memories had been unearthed so clearly thanks to the power of mana, but most people found their memories getting buried after months and years of living life. It was only natural that Myne’s memory would fade.

“...I never thought I’d be able to eat my Mom’s food again, and although that was just in my head, I never thought I’d get the opportunity to apologize to her. I’m just so, so relieved.”

Despite Myne thanking him directly, Ferdinand was unable to find the proper reply. He couldn’t think of what would be best to say. Myne’s storm of emotions still lingered within him, and perhaps he feared saying something that did not come from his own heart.

“Um, did you maybe feel everything I felt, since our minds were synchronized?”

“Of course I did, but do not blame yourself. That is how the tool functions.” Ferdinand sighed, and Myne stood up.

“I’ll give you a big squeeze, High Priest.”

“What? I do not understand. What is a big squeeze?” Ferdinand stiffened, not knowing what was about to happen.

“This is a big squeeze. Squeeeeeeze,” Myne said, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Whenever I have dreams that make me really emotional, I calm down by having Tuuli squeeze me like this. I have Lutz and my family, but you don’t have anyone to hug you like this, do you?”



Myne's proud voice rang in Ferdinand's ear as he froze in surprise. It would have been easy to push her off and tell her he didn't need her sympathy, but for some reason he didn't feel the urge. The storm of emotions had certainly tired him out.

Myne was probably feeling just as exhausted as he was. He could hear her heavy breathing calm down as she clung to him. Once she was calm enough, she let out a sigh and loosened the grip of her arms around his neck.

"High Priest, please use this on me again. I want to read those books and eat (Japanese food) again."

"I absolutely refuse. Synchronizing with you was beyond exhausting." This time, Ferdinand did detach Myne from him. He stood up and took the magic tool off his head. He had no intention of synchronizing with someone with such an exhausting range of emotions again.

But Myne refused to take her circlet off, and said "I won't give it back until you promise to synchronize with me again," before kneeling down and covering the circlet with her hands while Ferdinand blinked in disbelief.

...Now then, how should I explain this idiot to the Archduke? She was so unnaturally obsessed with books that thoughts of crime and wrongdoing didn't even enter her head. She also lacked common sense, a sense of shame, and the caution necessary to protect herself. If left unattended, it was impossible to say what she might do.

But she had an enormous amount of mana, more than the Archduke himself, and knowledge from a world with a staggeringly advanced culture, the value of which was incalculable. If they used her well as Benno had been, she would undoubtedly bring enormous fortune to Ehrenfest. At the very least, they could not afford to lose her to anyone else. She would need someone to watch over her and steer her in the right direction.

"Yes, she will need to be enclosed. Books will be the bait."

"Oh? So you'll synchronize with me again?"

Did she just intentionally choose to misinterpret me, or does she have no grasp on reality...? Ferdinand, looking down coldly at Myne as she beamed a happy smile at him, snatched the circlet off her head.

The Attendant of an Apprentice Blue Shrine Maiden

“Rosina, you mustn’t let such emotions show. You must always smile beautiful, composed smiles. Emotions should be used to enhance your art. When you are sad, play a haunting harspiel refrain. When you are moved by beauty, capture it in an illustration. When your heart trembles, express yourself with poetry. Your heart will calm as you channel your emotions,” explained Sister Christine with a composed smile of her own.

Sister Christine was an apprentice blue shrine maiden who was taking refuge in the temple from her father’s first wife, who despised her. She was such a night owl that even when I took my time after second bell dressing myself and doing my hair, it was a struggle to get her out of bed.

“Rosina, what shall we play today?”

When Wilma turned her troubled smile from our unwaking master to me, the other attendants began suggesting various songs. I selected the one most likely to please Sister Christine and began to play. Sometimes I played the harspiel, sometimes I played the flute. The instrument depended on my mood that day. It was routine for Sister Christine to awake at the end of the first song and request another with a smile. She would be changed by her gray shrine maiden attendants while I played the music she desired.

At third bell she might be visited by a tutor or she might return to her home in the Noble’s Quarter, so I often worked with attendants sent from Sister Christine’s family. We cleaned her room while she was busy, asked gray priests to replenish our art supplies, and handled letters or documents which needed her signature given to us by gray priests.

When the time for learning and chores ended, with a lunch thrown in the middle, it was time for an early bath. One of her gray priest attendants would bring hot water, allowing her to take a relaxing bath. Then, once we finished supper, it became simple to turn away visitors by stating that Sister Christine had already prepared for bed.

The highlight of our days with Sister Christine was the period of time that followed preparing for bed and bedtime itself. We would all amuse ourselves by composing poetry, drawing art, and playing music

until Sister Christine grew tired.

"I learn enough when visiting home and studying with the tutor. I would like to spend my time in the temple enjoying myself. Gray priests can handle all the chores. That is why they are here." She said that gray priests were there to handle the chores of the chamber and blue priests were there to handle the chores of the temple, whereas blue shrine maidens and their attendants were there to dedicate themselves to beautiful art. Their job was simply to enjoy themselves each day.

"Look only at what is beautiful, listen only to beautiful sounds. Hone your artistic senses. Look at this, for instance. Is it not beautiful?" So Sister Christine would always say while showing us rare, new things she brought back with her from the Noble's Quarter. Her chambers were filled with sheet music for all manner of songs, more paint and parchment for art than they could ask for, and several strange magic tools which only nobles were permitted to own.

...Why could Sister Myne not understand that such was the proper life of an apprentice blue shrine maiden? Sister Myne, who had recently joined the temple as an apprentice, had a pretty face. She was energetic and cute, with her expression changing on a dime, but her movements lacked dignity and grace. She knew no proper manners and her language was stiff. Despite loving to read, she did not appreciate art, which made her a far cry from Sister Christine.

It was for this reason that the High Priest ordered me to educate Myne. To use my experiencing serving Sister Christine for her benefit. And yet, despite my purpose being to educate, I was told I needed to do chores, and for some unfathomable reason I was criticized for playing the harspiel.

"Think of your answer by tomorrow morning, Rosina. Will you return to the orphanage, or will you accept that serving me will not be the same as serving Sister Christine? No matter what happens, I cannot become Sister Christine for you."

I could not immediately understand the implications of what Sister Myne said. But given that she demanded an answer by tomorrow, she seemed to be serious about sending me back to the orphanage.

I smiled gracefully to hide the panic in my heart, as taught by Sister Christine, but nonetheless my emotions were evident in the speed of my walking as I went to the orphanage and knocked hurriedly on Wilma's door.

"Please come in."

I went inside and saw Wilma pause her drawing of karuta art on thin boards to turn to me. The moment I saw her forever-peaceful smile, I lost control and burst into tears.

“Wilma, please listen. Only you who have served Sister Christine can understand how I feel.”

Wilma set aside her tools and turned her chair to face the bed. I sat on the bed to face her, then bemoaned the cruelty of Sister Myne’s attendants. There was Delia who, not content to just be uneducated and completely ignorant of art, insulted my harspiel playing as annoying. There was Gil, who sided with Delia and always spoke in the most crude of manners. And finally, there was Fran, who demanded that I do the work of a gray priest despite the fact I am clearly a gray shrine maiden.

“I merely lived as was natural for the attendant of an apprentice blue shrine maiden, but they make no effort to understand me even though they have never served one themselves before. They simply do not understand that I must play my music, discuss the beauty of poetry, and draw captivating art like I did in the past so that Sister Myne can learn to act more like a proper blue shrine maiden...”

The High Priest had received assistance with his paperwork from other blue priests in the past, so there was no need for Sister Myne to involve herself with it. Furthermore, she could entrust matters of the orphanage to Wilma, and matters of the workshop and lower city to Gil and the Gilberta Company. Sister Myne did not understand that the proper life for her was one where she dedicated herself to art, not books or libraries.

“Sister Christine said that joy in life was best found by understanding the beauty of art and loving it. Surely you understand that, Wilma.” So I said, but Wilma just lowered her shapely eyebrows a bit, looking at me like she might look at a troubled child.

“I understand that there is joy to be found in dedicating oneself to art, but children of that age would rather sleep than listen to music late into the night. I would be disturbed as well if you were to play music in the orphanage where children are trying to sleep.”

I blinked in surprise, having not expected Wilma to disagree with me. *But why?* I thought, and Wilma put a hand on her cheek.

“Sister Christine was quite slow to wake, but in Sister Myne’s chambers everyone wakes up early like we in the orphanage do, no?”

I lowered my eyes, thinking back to how Delia had begun knocking on my door shockingly early to wake me up. It was not graceful to be busily skittering around so early in the morning. However, everyone said “This is when we awake in the temple,” and would not budge.

“What did Fran say? As a former attendant of the High Priest, surely he offered an unbiased opinion unlike the young children.”

“Fran trusts Sister Myne just as she clearly trusts him, but he understands nothing of how a blue shrine maiden and attendants must

behave. Despite being a gray priest, he would not do as I instructed. In fact, he even ordered me to do things despite failing to do the manual labor expected of him. He is a very troubling fellow.”

It was unfathomable for an attendant priest to give orders to an attendant shrine maiden. The duty of a priest was to do labor while the duty of a shrine maiden was to offer her artistic talents to her mistress. And yet, for some reason, Wilma blinked in surprise.

“Is it not natural for Fran to give you orders, Rosina? He is Sister Myne’s head attendant, and you are an apprentice attendant who just began serving her.”

“But the harspiel...” I began to protest, but Wilma interrupted me with a slow shake of her head.

“Rosina, Sister Myne and Sister Christine are not the same person. You cannot ask the same thing from them and expect similar treatment.”

“...To think that you would say the same thing that Sister Myne did, Wilma,” I murmured in disbelief. Wilma let out a sigh.

“What else did Sister Myne say, I wonder?”

“She instructed that I stop playing harspiel after seventh bell so as to not keep others up at night. She said she understood how valuable I considered my hands for playing instruments, and so asked me to write in her place rather than do physical labor. And finally, she asked me to help Fran with working through the financial ledgers of her chambers, the workshop, and the orphanage so as to lessen the load on him.”

As all attendants were taught to read and do math, I wasn’t completely incapable of assisting Fran. But chores of that kind were for gray priests to do. While serving Sister Christine, we gray shrine maidens had competed in calligraphy and poetry, but I had no experience whatsoever with writing business letters. I had no talent for math, either, and would prove to be of little help. I truly was an attendant who had been trained solely in the arts.

“If she wishes to lessen the load on Fran, why does she not just hire more attendants...?”

“Sister Myne is not a noble like Sister Christine. She is a commoner and lacks the funds necessary to support ten or more attendants at once. To be clear, she is the kind of person to teach kids in the orphanage to work for themselves if they want to eat their fill of food.”

Wilma’s words gave me somewhat of a shock. I couldn’t immediately understand the prospect of an apprentice blue shrine maiden lacking the funds to hire more attendants. Were blue shrine maidens not defined by their ability to get whatever they wanted?

“But regardless of her commoner origins, she is a blue shrine

maiden. How could that be...?"

"The blue priests that remain in the temple all have five attendants at best, no? Sister Christine was just a special case."

Sister Christine had two attendants sent from home, six gray shrine maidens to appreciate art, four gray priests to do chores and manual labor, and multiple cooks, helpers, and tutors to satisfy her every need. I had never realized that it wasn't right to consider that as standard.

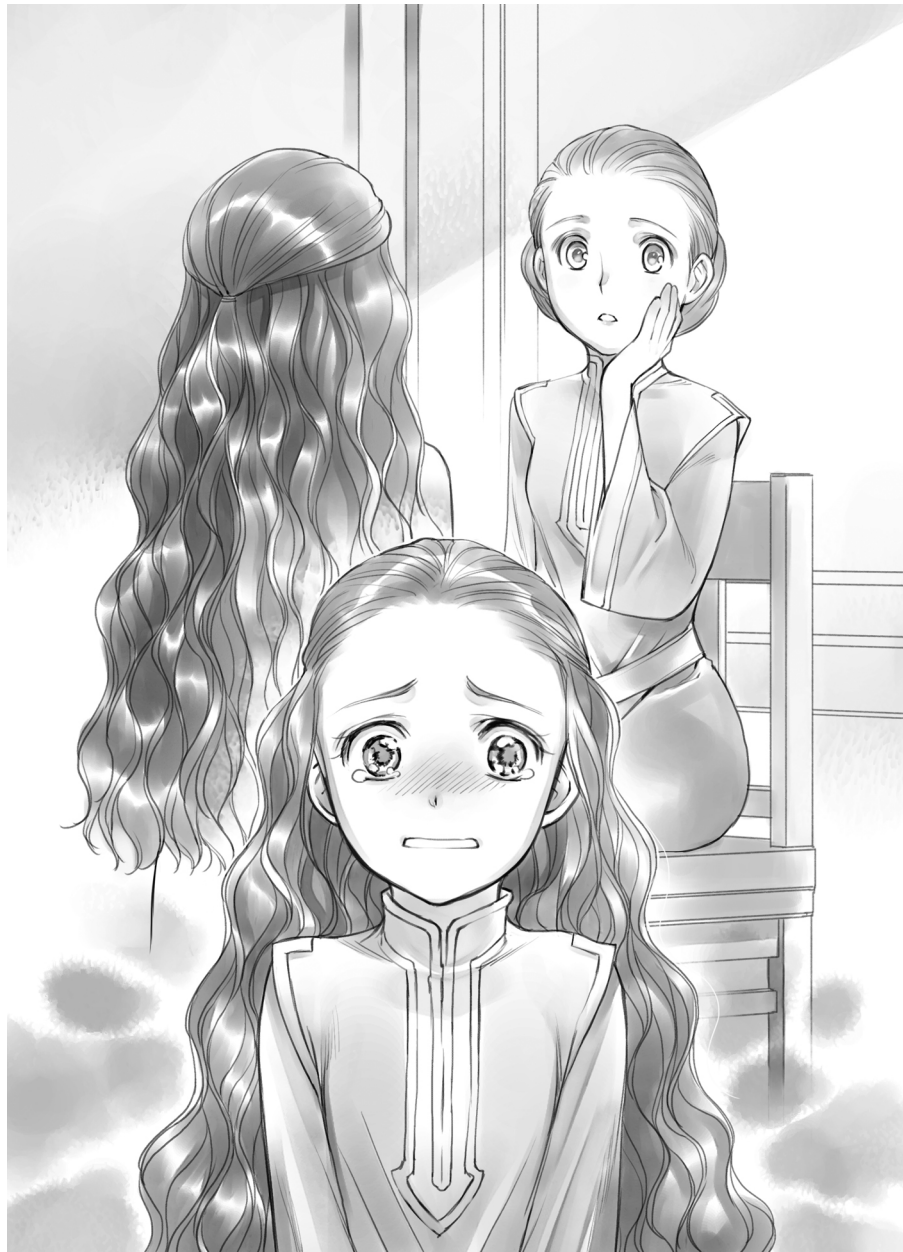
Sister Myne was a commoner, and she wasn't like Sister Christine. But up until now I had thought that her way of life and such was all due to a difference in her upbringing. I thought that it was my duty as her attendant to teach her to live just as Sister Christine had. I never considered the difference that their funds would make.

Wilma, looking at me quietly with her bright brown eyes, let out a sigh. "Rosina, dear. Do you think that perhaps you are just not equipped to serve Sister Myne?"

"...She asked me to draw a conclusion before tomorrow. I may choose whether to return to the orphanage or accept that she will not be just like Sister Christine was."

"I see. Then it is all up to you, Rosina. I believe that Sister Myne will be as accommodating as possible for you. If you are not satisfied with serving a master even after they have gone out of their way to accommodate your needs, I imagine that you will not survive as anyone's attendant except Sister Christine's. In that case, it would be best for you to return to the orphanage before you cause any more trouble."

Wilma's words cut me deeply. I had not expected her to be so harsh despite having served Sister Christine herself.



“Wilma... Don’t you think it’s wrong to make a shrine maiden do the work of a priest?”

“I do not. It is normal for shrine maidens to do chores and labor outside of Sister Christine’s chambers. If any other blue priest here had taken you as an attendant, it is likely that you wouldn’t even have an instrument. Your job might have been to offer flowers, even. Are you still unsatisfied with serving Sister Myne with all that in mind?”

A gray shrine maiden protesting to a blue priest that she wanted an instrument, or that educated shrine maidens shouldn’t be forced to offer flowers, would naturally be ignored entirely. I likely wouldn’t have even been able to disagree, as they would accept no disagreement in the first place.

...I had known that different attendants were trained in different areas to suit the needs of their masters, and yet still I never fully understood. I had worked hard so that I could potentially serve a blue priest without suffering, and yet I had never truly been ready.

I closed my eyes as tears streamed down my face. I had tried to change my mistress, Sister Myne, so that I could regain the life I had lost when Sister Christine left. I thought only of making her into a blue shrine maiden I was familiar with, never once thinking that it was I who needed to change.

What Sister Christine needed was different from what Sister Myne needed from her attendants. That was so obvious, and yet I had been too stubborn to notice it. I simply did not want to accept that no matter how much I wished it, no matter which blue shrine maiden I served, I would never regain what I had lost.

With my eyes still closed, I thought back to the time I spent with Sister Christine. The sound of harspiels. The music everyone was playing together. Graceful laughter filled the room as we spent elegant time absorbed in art. That had probably been the happiest and most fulfilling time in my entire life.

I then thought back to my unhappy days in the orphanage, after being sent back there when Sister Christine returned home. I felt nothing but sorrow at the lack of instruments, the scarcity of food, and the damage done to my hands by doing labor. I spent each day imagining myself playing the harspiel, imagining the music in my otherwise silent life bereft of beauty. Not once did I wish anything but to be serving a blue shrine maiden again.

...Should I learn to do chores under Sister Myne, or should I return to the orphanage without a harspiel? My answer came the second I remembered how emotional I had gotten after playing the harspiel once again. I had sighed from the comfortable weight of the instrument and smiled at the firm touch of the strings, feeling so much

happiness from the music that I came close to weeping. Learning chores would be nothing compared to giving up a life of music once again.

“Wilma, I would like to have as much music in my life as possible. I will therefore serve under Sister Myne. And thus, I will learn to do chores.”

“Sister Myne will appreciate your efforts to improve, just as she rewarded those who worked hard in the orphanage on that first day. There is not much more I can do for you than listen to your woes, but I wish you all the success in the world.”

Ever since that day, I began studying to do paperwork as Sister Myne’s attendant, facing my mathematical fears in the process. All so that I could serve as her attendant, rather than continue to strive to be Sister Christine’s attendant.

The first thing I learned was that Sister Myne was abnormally good at paperwork. Despite her young age she was vastly superior in mathematics to me, and she was more useful when helping Fran than I could hope to be. The paperwork would be manageable with Sister Myne’s assistance, but she had religious matters to attend to, not to mention her education and training as an apprentice blue shrine maiden. Fran told me that I had to work hard so that Sister Myne could have more time.

“Rosina, please give these to Wilma.”

“Understood.” Unlike Sister Myne, who was not used to hiding one’s emotions and reading the expressions of others, Fran could to some extent see through my facade and tell when I was beginning to grow exhausted from work. When those times came, he sent me to the orphanage or the workshop on errands, or otherwise gave me a break by teaching Sister Myne about the gods.

I put away the pen and ink, then headed to the orphanage. It was my first time going to the orphanage since resolving to change myself to serve as Sister Myne’s attendant. I would need to thank Wilma for advising me to change my own way of thinking rather than try to change Sister Myne.

“Is Wilma here, by chance?” I asked Lizzie, who was by the door to the orphanage. She pointed to further into the dining hall and replied that she was watching the children eat.

First, blue robes such as Sister Myne ate, then their attendants ate. The food was taken to the orphanage, where once again the food trickled down according to status: the adults ate first, then the baptized children, then the pre-baptism children. This meant that the youngest children were the last to eat. Much time had passed since I’d had lunch, but it seemed that the children were just now beginning to

eat. I could see Wilma sitting at a back table with six children.

“Does everyone have their food? Good, then let us praise and thank the gods for their divine blessings. O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, o mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided,” chanted Wilma, and the young children all chanted back before throwing themselves at their lunch.

They ate quickly, likely due to having empty stomachs. Wilma had already eaten, so she spent her time instructing them on table manners while cleaning up their spills, but it seemed that taking care of six children at once was a bit too much for her.

“The food is always so good now. I love this soup,” said one child.

“Judging by all the neatly cut vegetables, I guess Lizzie was cooking?” said another.

“We can make this soup thanks to Sister Myne teaching us the recipe, taking us to the forest to gather food, and buying the rest of what we need with the money earned by selling the paper she taught us to make.”

“That’s what you always say, Wilma. Let me finish for you. ‘You all need to thank Sister Myne,’ right?” laughed the first child.

It was thanks to Sister Myne that the pre-baptism children could happily eat in the dining hall together without being stuck starving in the cellar. It was also thanks to her that even on days with few divine gifts, bowls of soup could be lined up on the tables.

Sister Christine never even looked at the orphanage, and if she had seen the starving children in the cellar she likely would have just scrunched up her nose and left, not wanting to look at ugly things any longer than she had to. She never would have thought about rescuing them, much less acting on those thoughts.

I began to notice the good things about Sister Myne after trying to change myself. I had once thought that her connections to the lower city, her operation of the workshop, and her efforts to improve the orphanage were all just getting in the way of her art education, but both I and those in the orphanage had been saved by her actions.

“Oh my, Rosina. How did things go after all that?” Wilma noticed me and stood up to walk this way. I smiled while handing her the boards Fran had given me.

“I have been learning to do the math I hate ever so much. And... Sister Myne has praised the gracefulness of my speech and behavior, saying that she wishes to work hard to mimic how I act. Did you ask her to say that, Wilma?”

“All I said was that you had spent longer with Sister Christine than anyone else, and would be a better example to learn from than

anyone in the temple.”

One of Sister Myne’s finer points was her willingness to ask to be taught things she did not know or understand. I myself always hesitated before asking Fran questions.

“Wilma. I have begun to think that it is good of me to work to conquer my flaws, and in the orphanage director chambers I have found some small joys.”

“Oh my. Small joys, such as?”

“Perhaps because Sister Myne is a commoner, she knows many songs and lyrics that I have never heard before.”

I would occasionally see Sister Myne singing a song I had never heard before, while bobbing her head to keep the beat. She often hummed or sang in a quiet voice that made the song itself hard to catch. But when I heard the song, I would find myself subconsciously stopping my work to listen, much to Fran’s bemusement.

“Furthermore, Delia seems to have grown interested in harspiels, and at times she watches me play.” I was allowed to play music until seventh bell. As of late, I had begun to spend the time before bed with Delia, playing music. I found it somewhat distasteful that she aimed to be a concubine, but she was a hard enough worker to agree with Sister Myne’s assertion that Delia was quite dedicated to improving herself, regardless of what end that improvement was for.

“I see. I am glad to know things are going so well. I find your dedication to conquering your flaws quite beautiful, Rosina. I am sure that Sister Christine would try to preserve your efforts in art,” said Wilma with a giggle. My efforts would not be preserved in art, but in the end they would be preserved in Sister Myne’s paperwork.

“I’m sorry for worrying you, Wilma. But I will be quite alright now.”

Apprentice Chef in the Temple

While everyone in the orphanage was going off to butcher pigs, Hugo and I were teaching Monika and Nicola—the two apprentice gray shrine maidens that would be helping me over the winter—to cook.

Nicola had her overflowing amount of orange hair, so bright it was close to red, braided behind her. She loved to cook and she was a real cutie, smiling all the time while she worked. Monika on the other hand was a quiet, serious girl who had her dark-green hair bundled behind her head. I was teaching them carefully since they would be helping me throughout the winter while Hugo was gone, and honestly they were both fast learners.

Nicola asked me something while she, Monika, Hugo, and the new chef Todd were eating lunch. “Ella, why did you decide to become a temple chef?” she asked.

Hugo averted his eyes, knowing my circumstances, and Todd leaned forward curiously. The sight of that made Monika lower her gaze a bit.

“Those in the lower city really don’t like the temple, right? It’s hard not to notice that on the way to the forest. But you came to the temple anyway. You’re even teaching us to cook without looking upset about it. I find that really strange,” she continued. I thought back to my meeting with Benno, the man who had made it all happen.

...*Wow, he’s super rich.* At my uncle’s request, I was visiting the Eatery Guild to ask for an extension on the due date of our taxes, and there I found myself looking at a man sitting in the best seat in the guild. His clothes were way more expensive than anything you would normally ever see in the Eatery Guild. I stared at him and, wondering why someone as rich as him was here, strained my ears to hear what he was talking to another guild member about.

“Did you find anyone willing to be Hugo’s assistant?”

“Mmm... I think it’ll be too hard of a job for Hugo to do alone, but I’m telling you, Benno, nobody wants in on this.”

Judging by their conversation, the rich guy was named Benno and he was at the guild to look for an assistant chef. I felt my heart thump. I clenched my fists as I felt my pumping blood heat up with excitement. ...*Could this be the guidance of Cuococalura, God of*

Cooking?!

"I'm telling you, Ella, we can only wait so long... Hey, are you even listening?" The guild member I had been in the middle of talking to called out to me.

I looked back at him in surprise, having forgotten about him, then pointed at Benno and whispered hurriedly. "Hey, hey, is that rich guy looking for a chef?!"

"Huh...? Oh, Benno. He's looking for a chef for the eatery he's about to build, but not just any chef. He wants someone to train in the temple to learn to cook food for nobles."

"...Wait, the temple?"

The temple was a place that nobody in the city wanted to deal with if they could help it. Who knew what would happen if nobles got their eye on you. There was an orphanage in the temple, and anyone sent there would be worked like slaves by nobles. It was said they could kill anyone they wanted without any punishment. I had even heard that the girls there were forced to sleep with nobles.

...But how was that any different from most waitresses, really? I was working as an apprentice chef in a nighttime bar my uncle owned. At the moment I was just helping to cook the food, but when I came of age I would be assigned to work as a waitress. My cousin Lea—his daughter—had been sent out as a waitress right after she came of age, so why would I be any different? The men in the store would leer at me, catcall me, and pay my uncle so that he would send me to their rooms.

No matter how much I hated that, it was the family business and I couldn't escape from it. My choices were to do a killer job helping a noble's chef, or save up enough money to start my own store before coming of age. My current goal was to be like Leise, who had performed so well as a noble's chef that the guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild hired her to be his head chef. If I trained in the temple, maybe I could learn to cook noble food just like she did.

"Hey, mister. Do chefs in the temple work as waitresses too?" I called out to Benno, and he blinked his dark-red eyes in surprise. But his surprised expression soon turned into a grimace as he looked me over with piercing eyes.

"...Nah, they don't work as waitresses. Apprentice shrine maidens have well-trained attendants to serve them. Not to mention that you'd be exclusively cooking for a shrine maiden, and shrine maidens don't want *that* kind of service. In fact, they don't want commoner chefs talking to them at all."

I couldn't imagine anything better for me than becoming an apprentice chef for a rich noble girl who didn't need me to work as a waitress. "I'm still an apprentice chef, but I think I can help out. I'm

pretty good, if I do say so myself.” I slapped a hand against my arm with a smile.

Benno looked back at the guild member he was talking to and pointed my way. “How good is she?”

“Ella’s got all the basics down. You’d want someone a bit more skilled to serve a noble right away, but she’d do just fine learning while serving as Hugo’s assistant. Her goal is actually to be a noble’s chef, so she’ll have the motivation and guts you’re looking for.”

“Hmm...” Benno fell into thought while looking at me, and the guild member I had been talking to hurriedly called out to him.

“Wait, Benno! Taking a guy to the temple is one thing, but a girl? You’ll ruin her chances to get married in the future. Ella, you’ve gotta think about your future here. Don’t just jump at the first opportunity you see like an idiot!”

I pursed my lips at him. I wasn’t being an idiot, I knew what I was doing. It may have been the family business, but I didn’t want to be a waitress. I wanted to find another path in life.

“I’m going to be forced to be a waitress at my uncle’s place once I’m an adult anyway. The temple won’t be any different. Plus, he said she’s a blue shrine maiden. That means she’s a rich noble girl. I’ve been thinking my whole life that I want to become a noble’s chef to get out of my uncle’s store. I don’t mind going to the temple to make that dream a reality.” I spoke my mind while Benno watched on with dark-red eyes. He nodded in satisfaction at my determination.

“...Alright then. I’ll hire you.”

“My uncle fought back hard, but Mom gave me her full support. Mom had no choice but to work as a waitress when my dad died, so she was just happy that I had found another path in life...”

“Oh, so being a waitress is like offering flowers here. We can’t refuse if a blue priest we serve asks us to offer flowers, so I completely understand why you would want to find another way to survive,” replied Nicola.

“We’re cooking here partially so that Sister Myne gets to know us better, in hopes that one day she asks us to serve as her attendants,” added on Monika.

It seemed that the rumors were true and that the gray shrine maidens in the orphanage really were forced to work like waitresses were. I could really relate to how Nicola and Monika were striving to improve their situation to avoid being forced to offer flowers.

“That ‘Mom’ person sounds quite kind,” said Nicola, and Monika nodded with a smile. They seemed so sincere I had to hold back the urge to laugh and explain their mistake. Families were so normal to me and everyone I knew that I had no idea how I should explain

them. All I could do was continue after brushing off their comment with a smile.

"I'm underage, so I can't change stores without Mom's permission. She went to the Eatery Guild with me to sign a contract with the Gilberta Company, and that's where I met Hugo for the first time."

Nicole and Monika both looked at Hugo, who gave a small smile. "I didn't think I'd be working in the temple with an underage girl like Ella, so man, seeing her sure was a surprise."

"I was just glad to see that you were a nice person, Hugo." Hugo was my coworker and my teacher. He had chestnut hair and brown eyes that gave him a friendly look.

"And I'm always stuck being just a nice guy 'cause of the way I look!" moaned Hugo, blaming that for his lack of a girlfriend. Nicola and Monika blinked in surprise.

"Is it not good to be a good person? Is there something inconvenient about that?"

"Not for me," I explained with a laugh while looking at Hugo. "And not for you two, so don't worry about it."

Hugo had broad shoulders and the muscular arms that most chefs had thanks to all the heavy stuff they had to carry, plus calluses on his hands from gripping knives so much. When we shook hands at our first meeting, I had seen that his hands had the same calluses that mine did.

I noticed that he was looking at my hands too. I grinned, and with his lips curved into a smile he said "Not bad. Looks like you pass, for now."

...That was a pretty cool line. He looked cool when he said it, and he looked cool while he worked too. He always had a sharp and serious expression when he was cooking. There was something uniquely cool about a guy who had a job and did it well. He probably only didn't have a girlfriend because there had been no girls at the restaurant where he worked.

"I signed with the Gilberta Company and decided to work in the temple to escape being a waitress, but there's been nothing but surprises here. Right, Hugo?"

"Yup. I'm used to it now, but those first days were crazy. This place is just way different from the city," said Hugo, and Todd gave a big nod.

"I'm still getting my mind blown every day. My hands get so shaky and sweaty when I think that a noble might see me that I can hardly work at all."

"Todd, that's kinda bad. You could stand to chill out a little."

Life as an apprentice chef in the temple was entirely unlike what I was used to. I never expected that I would be taught about washing

my hands, keeping myself clean, and hygiene in general before learning more about cooking. When we had been instructed to clean ourselves before entering the orphanage director chambers, Hugo and I had actually looked at each other with wide eyes before processing what we had been told.

“You will be expected to maintain a high degree of personal hygiene,” began Fran. “The Italian restaurant that Sister Myne is investing in will demand just as much cleanliness, so the faster you adjust to this the better. As you are now I cannot introduce you to Sister Myne, and you will not be able to perform your duties.”

“Hugo, Ella. This is Fran, the head attendant of the shrine maiden you’re gonna be serving,” explained Benno. “You’re gonna want to listen to everything he says. Fran, I’ll be waiting in the hall. Do me a favor and teach these two how things work in the temple.”

Benno then went into the chambers first and left us with Fran. It seemed that we would be continuing our relationship with Sister Myne even after we started working in the Italian restaurant. Nothing we could do but get ourselves clean.

Fran guided us to a well. After giving us a thorough look-over, he had us wash our hands and faces over and over. He was so thorough that I honestly wanted to complain about how much soap we were wasting. We had both bathed the night before since Benno warned us we needed to be clean before meeting the apprentice blue shrine maiden (given that she was a noble), but even so, Fran seemed displeased with how we looked. I could only imagine what a disaster it would have been if we hadn’t bathed at all.

“Please bathe the night before when you are expected at the temple in the morning.”

“Wha? Wait, does that mean we need to bathe every day?” I asked, and Hugo murmured “Seriously?” beside me. I couldn’t believe it either. During the summer we could manage since it was just carrying water, but during the winter we would have to heat the water over a fire before we could clean ourselves with it. Hugo and I flinched at the idea, but Fran just nodded like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“Sister Myne is particularly loath to allow the unclean to handle her food and cooking instruments, and as you will be seen by noble blue robes, you must always clean yourselves before arriving to work. This is true for all those in the temple, including those priests and shrine maidens in the orphanage who do not serve as attendants.”

...In other words, this Fran guy is bathing daily. That’s normal in the temple? Oooof.

After making sure that we were clean, Fran nodded and took us to the hall where Benno was waiting so that he could introduce us to his

master, Sister Myne. Once there, he climbed the stairs to the second floor where her personal room was.

I stealthily slid over to Benno while watching Fran go. “What’s the deal, Benno? He said it’s normal to clean yourself and your clothes every day in the temple. Do we really have to do all that before coming to work every day? That would be way too much,” I protested. Benno widened his eyes in surprise, but Hugo backed me up.

“Ella’s right. We don’t even know if our clothes will be dry by morning. The single pair of clothes you gave us for this just isn’t gonna be enough.”

Hugo was far from wealthy, having worked in a normal lower city restaurant, and I myself didn’t have many clothes I could safely wear to the temple. While feeling a bond with Hugo over our similar circumstances, I protested to Benno that cleaning clothes every day would be too much for us when we didn’t have any servants to help like he did.

“Y’know, Lutz was talking about that too. Alright. I’ll sell you a bunch of clothes to use here for cheap.”

“Whew. Thank you.”

“Oh. Shut it, Ella. Sister Myne’s here,” warned Hugo, so I hurriedly shut my mouth and looked up the stairs just in time to see a little girl wearing blue shrine maiden robes walking gracefully down the stairs. That was Sister Myne, it seemed.

Wow! A real rich noble girl! It was my first time seeing Sister Myne, and she was an adorable little girl. She had dark-blue hair that looked like the night sky, which flowed behind her perfectly straight unlike my curly knots. Her nose, eyes, and mouth were all cute and shapely, giving her a neat and pretty face.

“Sister Myne, this the Gilberta Company’s chef, Hugo. With him is Ella, his assistant. Hugo, you will be taught the recipes of nobles here. Pay attention and learn well.” Benno spoke in a polite tone, and his reserved behavior made it clear just how important Sister Myne was.

“Allow me to guide you to the kitchen,” Fran said, and finally we were taken to our new workplace.

...*Wow!* It was a wide kitchen filled with all manner of equipment, including a large furnace oven that you only ever saw in bakeries down in the lower city. I would need to learn how to use all this equipment to get hired at that new restaurant Benno was talking about. This really was the perfect opportunity for us.

Everything in the kitchen was cleaned to a shine, entirely unlike the kitchen in my uncle’s place. I could tell that Hugo was getting excited too. You would never see a kitchen like this in the lower city. Nobles really did live in a different world than commoners. Everything would be different for me now; I would be expected to do

work fit for a kitchen of this quality.

“What you must learn first is the importance of cleanliness. Keep your utensils and dishes clean at all times. Maintain the state the kitchen is in now.” Fran, holding wooden boards, was our instructor—passing the words of Sister Myne to us. He himself was an orphan and a gray priest, but he knew how to read the text on the boards, and he spoke so politely and eloquently that I could hardly believe it. All it took was a single glance to see how well educated and trained he was, which wasn’t what I expected at all based on what I had heard in the city about the orphans.

But the surprises didn’t stop there. The instructions he gave for how to cook for nobles were just shock after shock. He told us to wash our hands multiple times in the process of cooking, there was a ton of prep work to do, and the exact recipe was strict about the order in which we did things.

“Continue using the broth to cook the ingredients. Do not boil the vegetables and then throw away the water.”

“No throwing away the water at all?” The idea of not throwing away the water after boiling vegetables in it was troubling. That would let all sorts of tiny bits of dirt and filth get into the water, and it was well known that using boiled water like that would make you miscarry or become unable to have kids at all.

I looked at Benno, and he gave a light nod. I remembered his instruction that we should obey Fran’s every word, so I stifled my disgust and kept cooking.

But when I actually tasted the soup in a bowl, it tasted unlike anything I had tried before. The flavor of the vegetables was stronger than ever, and the slight amount of salting strengthened the sweetness, leading to a gentle flavor that felt like it was spreading through my whole body.

My eyes sparkled and it felt as if a door had been opened in front of me, shining bright light down onto me. I could feel my world expanding, and despite Sister Myne being nearby I was so happy I couldn’t contain myself.

“I still remember how shocked I was the first time I had soup for nobles. It feels gross to make, but the flavor is just amazing. I couldn’t believe what I was eating.”

“Oh? But the soup we’ve made here isn’t how nobles make soup,” said Monika curiously while looking at Nicola, who nodded in support.

“All the food in the orphanage comes from nobles as divine gifts, but only the soup from here tastes this rich.”

Hugo, Todd, and I all looked at each other in surprise. We had

thought that the recipes were strange due to being from a noble, but it seemed like it was just Sister Myne's recipes that were weird.

"It's just Sister Myne's recipes? Just her soup? All her other recipes are special too...? I guess there must be a pretty big reason why the contract Benno had us sign said that we couldn't make the food from the recipes we learned here without his or Sister Myne's permission," I mused.

"Euuugh, this is awful. I didn't want to learn any big-time secrets like this," replied Todd while shaking in fear, terrified that he was now not only connected to, but also knew the contents of tightly kept secrets.

Hugo, in contrast, gave a confident grin. "Heh. Recipes that no other nobles know, huh? Sounds pretty interesting."

His confidence inspired me, and with a hand on my hip I puffed out my not-so-large chest with pride. "Hugo, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I'm the one who's going to be learning more and more of Sister Myne's recipes."

Hugo looked at me with confusion, so I gave a smug grin before continuing. "'Cause I mean, I'm going to be staying here and cooking for her all winter. She's definitely going to teach me new recipes. Let's do our best, Nicola, Monika. You two so that you can become Sister Myne's attendants, and me so that I can beat Hugo."

"Right!" Nicola and Monika gave an excited reply and smiled at each other while I looked at Hugo.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind teaching you the new recipes when spring comes, Hugo. If you ask nicely."

Everyone laughed as Hugo gave a frustrated groan.

...I'll make lots of food over the winter, learn all sorts of new recipes, and finally catch up to Hugo! As autumn ended and winter preparations began, I pumped myself up with a new goal in sight.

At the time, I still hadn't realized exactly why it was that I had my eyes set on Hugo and catching up to him.

Afterword

Hello again. It's me, Miya Kazuki. Thank you for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm Part 2 Volume 2*.

With her mother pregnant and a little brother or sister on the way, Myne gets serious and dedicates herself to making a picture book. She secures an artist, is assigned an attendant to educate her, and despite everything has even less freedom than before due to what is expected of her as an apprentice blue shrine maiden.

Still, she finally managed to finish her first book. Lutz and Tuuli have been helping her from the very beginning, and with them at her side she finally finishes it at her home, where everything started.

It's been a long journey since Part 1 where she was flailing around with faux-papyrus and clay tablets, but this is not the end. She now begins her new quest, one to establish printing and mass production of books. After all, her dream is for there to be so many books that she can't hope to read them all.

And of course, in this volume Myne finally makes contact with the world of nobles that she had almost entirely been avoiding as an apprentice shrine maiden. There's the white bird that passes on a message, the Knight's Order getting sent to exterminate a feyplant that has grown too large, the Healing Ritual that heals the drained earth, and finally, the magic tool that peers into memories.

Ferdinand synchronizes with Myne and experiences the world of her dreams, and despite being exasperated by how much her mind is filled with books, he ultimately concludes that she is not a threat. But Myne will be targeted by other nobles for her enormous quantity of mana.

Out of all the requests, I chose to write short stories for Rosina and Ella this time. One showed what Rosina went through when deciding to serve Sister Myne. The other showed why Ella chose to study in the temple despite having been an apprentice chef in a bar, which I think was a perspective not before seen from the other craftsmen shown. I hope you enjoyed them.

I tried my best to lower the page count as much as reasonably possible, but this volume ended up quite thick as well. Thank you to everyone at TO Books who is working to accommodate this.

The cover art this time was Myne wearing her ceremonial robes. It's so cool, showing off the staff, armor, and all sorts of other things

that reflect how this volume got dramatically more fantasy-like in just a few chapters. Thank you, You Shiina-sama.

And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again next volume.

November 2015, Miya Kazuki







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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 2 Apprentice Shrine Maiden
Volume 2
by Miya Kazuki

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